

Tod Sloan is generally accepted as having revolutionised English racing by introducing a new style of riding in the late 1890s. His meteoric rise and fall are invariably portrayed by lazy historians as the tale of an incorrigible gambler and an outrageous prima donna. By extension he is presented as having been author of his own downfall when, after riding 253 winners from only 812 mounts over four partial seasons in England, he was advised that he need not bother applying for a licence to ride in 1901. The real story is far more intriguing.



The standard British text upon Sloan wrongly confirms the stereotype that he rode with short stirrups, that he had abnormally short legs and rather an exhibitionist. In fact, photographs show that he and his fellow countrymen rode much longer than most current jump jockeys. They also show that he was a most elegant dresser.<sup>1</sup> That such a fundamental inaccuracy

is so routinely presented by supposed historians in direct contravention of readily available photographic evidence is bizarre: the entire Sloan saga deserves further examination.

Fred Archer's nemesis, George Fordham, had probably adopted a similar style to the Americans about thirty years before the main invasion arrived in Europe. Some thought "The Demon" the best rider of his era, as even Archer found it hard to tell just how Fordham's mounts were travelling in a race: Archer rode more winners in a tragically short career. As the American style caught on, a contributor to the "Sporting Times" in 1905 was reminded of Thomas Lye, who had ridden three winners of the Oaks and two of the St. Leger between 1826 and 1842.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Sloan was never actually warned off. After his fall from grace here he rode briefly in both New Orleans and California, but as he always expected to be reinstated in England, he made no serious attempt to resume his American career. He was not barred from race meetings nor from contact with licensed persons in England, so soon became involved in owning and helping to train horses both here and on the Continent. But although contemporary riders suspended for ostensibly more serious offences were quite soon reinstated, Sloan's ban remained in place.

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<sup>1</sup> Tod Sloan, *By Himself*. Pp. 100, 132, 142, 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Northern Turf History*, Vol. 1. J. Fairfax-Blakeborough. P.256

Sloan was not the first American rider to come to England. Gilpatrick and one or two others had ridden here for American owners in the mid-1800s without attracting much notice. Willie Simms had been leading jockey in the States for the two years before he came to England in 1895. He rode four winners from just 19 rides, but Victorian Britain was nowhere near ready for a black jockey; fifteen years later author J. Fairfax -Blakeborough saw the heavyweight World Champion Jack Johnson “walked out” from the club enclosure at lowly Hexham!<sup>3</sup> However Simms remained well appreciated in America and returned home to win Kentucky Derbies in 1896 and 1898.

Several English riders had relocated to America in the last half of the 1800s. George Barbee, George Evans, Edward Feakes and William Hayward had all had some high-profile success there.<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s and 40s John Longden, who like Steve Donoghue was born in Warrington, headed the American list three times by number of winners and twice by prizemoney. More recently ex Staff Ingham apprentice Mike Hole had considerable success Stateside but came to a sudden end in suspicious circumstances: his son Taylor has also done well as a rider.

Until the end of the nineteenth century American racing owed much to the old-time Southern institutions. It retained a tradition of elite black riders for thirty years after the Civil War, until the turn of the twentieth century saw things alter almost overnight. Much has been made of the fact that simple racism did away with them. When widespread track closures intensified competition for rides a new generation of white riders determined to achieve a closed shop. No doubt the segregation legislation of the mid 1890s legitimised their efforts, and there seems to have been no attempt by racing officials to control matters.

Had there remained enough rides to go around, then market forces may have, to some extent, maintained the status quo: a century later the extreme expansion of British racing forced an acceptance of female riders, something that had looked most unlikely in the 1990s. Once it became clear that no coloured jockey’s mounts could hope for clear sailing, and with the tabloid press happy to put extremely negative interpretations upon any incidents involving black riders, few trainers were prepared to swim against the stream and to keep putting them up.

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<sup>3</sup> Sporting Days and Sporting Stories. J. Fairfax-Blakeborough p.118

<sup>4</sup> Cherry and Black. W.S. Vosburgh 1916. Pp. 12, 13, 24, 25, 76, 77, 118, 119, 130, 131.

Very few black riders relocated to Europe, with J. Winkfield being most successful.<sup>5</sup> Tony Hamilton too had made a good start in Russia before suffering a career-ending fall, but top riders like Alonzo Clayton and Simms ended their lives in very reduced circumstances. Only recently have native-born black riders such as Marlon St. Julien and Deshawn Parker been able to regain national prominence in America.<sup>6</sup>

The last decades of the nineteenth century had been an age of “Robber Barons and Empire Builders”. Some built and supported new racetracks as conspicuous monuments to their own wealth.<sup>7</sup> Anti-betting legislation severely impacted on American racing in the early 1900s and the number of tracks fell from over three hundred in 1897 to just twenty-five in 1908. The decline didn’t really affect elite sport in the New York area for several years and the leading rider in America still averaged about 270 wins between 1900 and 1910.<sup>8</sup> Some of what is regarded as “old money” nowadays was still new money in 1900 and the initial decision by the big New York stables to race in England reflected social one-upmanship and an ostentatious quest for international recognition. Most of the attendant wave of jockeys, gamblers, and hangers-on approached the old world more in the spirit of the old-time Norsemen.

John H. Davis, whose racing memory stretched from the 1840s until Sloan's era, reviewed the riders that he had seen. He judged Simms to have been one of the best jockeys of his time, and another black rider, Isaac Murphy to be “probably the greatest jockey this country ever produced”. Interestingly he also observed that “every jockey should try to be a gentleman ... honest sober and careful in all he does .... I believe Tod Sloan to be all this and more”.<sup>9</sup>

Lester Reiff had ridden 15 winners here during a brief visit in 1896. He returned in earnest in 1899 accompanied by his brother John who was then just fourteen. Both were extremely successful. Quite possibly they were too successful.

Sloan had been winning at a 30% rate at home when he arrived in late 1897 to ride St. Cloud in both the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire for James R. Keene. The double engagement was not unusual in those days, and the horse was only narrowly defeated in the second leg. Sloan

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<sup>5</sup> Wink, *The Incredible Life of Jimmy Winkfield*. Edward Hotaling

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Black Jockeys*. Edward Hotaling

<sup>7</sup> *Their Turf*. Bernard Livingston. P. 31

<sup>8</sup> *The Story of Your Life*. James Lambie p. 247

<sup>9</sup> *The American Turf with Personal References*. 1906 John H. Davis.

was adamant that he had won but disputed results were common well into the twentieth century when races were run on the full width of the Rowley Mile course. By the end of the season he had managed 20 winners from just 53 rides.

By 1900 an invasion of American trainers and jockeys was in full flow, attended by a big gambling faction. Some American owners imported large strings of yearlings along with their older runners and overall the visitors were quite successful. The jockeys' list was an American benefit, Lester Reiff scoring 143 wins and Johnny 124, followed by Sloan with 84, B.J. Rigby [68], J.H. Martin [52] and newcomer Danny Maher [27].

Henry Spencer came to England in 1902 to ride James R. Keene's horses trained by Felix Leach. He didn't have much luck and soon went home, however Leach thought him an outstanding rider, perhaps better than Sloan or Danny Maher.<sup>10</sup>

Although several of the American trainers were admittedly able horsemen, doping was not forbidden at the time and there seems little doubt that narcotics played a part in their overnight transformations of horses that had lost their form into viable gambling propositions.

Trainer George Lambton thought that some of the Americans were good trainers and that their aversion to the hot dark stables of the English system contributed to their success.<sup>11</sup> However he apparently felt obliged to act for the common good in publicising the doping issue; moral rectitude was a Lambton family failing. In 1903, with the blessing of the Jockey Club, his stable ran several horses that were doped. As predicted, these showed marked improvement. As a result, doping was made a warning-off offence in 1904. By then many of the Americans had already relocated in France.

Nothing succeeds like success; the immigrant riders soon had a strong following among the local gambling fraternity as well as with the big American punters. Although the latter were initially successful they departed as suddenly as they had appeared, some owing large sums to the ring.

Although Sloan's riding was generally unquestioned, his independent attitude and the opulence of his lifestyle seems to have aroused

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<sup>10</sup> Sods I Have Cut on the Turf. Jack Leach pp. 36-7.

<sup>11</sup> Men and Horses I Have Known. Hon. George Lambton pp. 246, 250-7

resentment in some quarters, as far exceeding what the “great and the good” felt appropriate to one of his social standing.

Royal trainer Richard Marsh and George Lambton were rather patronising in describing Sloan as a genius in the saddle but as most unwise in his companions when out of it.<sup>12</sup> Both conveniently neglect to mention that Madden and Rickaby, respectively their own retained riders, were ruled off in 1902 for “keeping bad company”. Having friends in high places, Madden was readmitted in 1903 and Rickaby a year or two later. In Britain “yesterday's news is tomorrow's fish and chips wrapping” – but not in Sloan's case!

Although Sloan's spectacular fall from grace has usually been justified as having been entirely of his own making, this interpretation may well be as inaccurate as the idea that he rode very with short stirrups, and simply another example of idle “historians” following each other like sheep. As time goes by so the body of independent contemporary evidence, which might reveal “the many-sidedness of truth”, inevitably dwindles. With a 30% success rate, logic dictates that he must invariably have done his best to win. Also, apart from one very minor incident involving a waiter after racing at Ascot, there seems to be no actual record of any wild behaviour attached to himself or to his entourage.

The occasion which ostensibly led to Sloan's downfall was Codoman's second in the Cambridgeshire of 1900. The next day he was interviewed by the local Stewards; he had reportedly backed the horse heavily and was also said to have been promised a large present by an outside party if the horse had won. Sloan readily admitted both charges, saying, whether he believed it or not, that he understood that it was permitted, as it was in America, for a jockey to back his own mount.

Before the Cambridgeshire meeting Captain Machell had remarked to George Lambton that Sloan had backed Codoman for the race on his [Machell's] behalf, and there can have been no great secret about it.<sup>13</sup> And Lambton certainly seems to have understood that Sloan was backing his own mounts previous to this.<sup>14</sup>

As the horse was beaten the question of receiving a present was academic and that offence became a purely notional one. The potential donor escaped unscathed and Sloan was dismissed with a caution. He continued

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<sup>12</sup> A Trainer to Two Kings. Richard Marsh. Men and Horses I have Known. Hon. George Lambton.

<sup>13</sup> Tod Sloan, By Himself. P. 188-9

<sup>14</sup> Men and Horses I Have Known. Hon. George Lambton. P. 246.

to ride for the remainder of the meeting, after which he had already stated in the press that he would finish for the year.

A few days after Newmarket Lord Derby decided that he required Sloan to ride Ormskirk at Liverpool. Sloan declined, saying that his season was over, that he had been out on the town, and that he was not in shape.<sup>15</sup> Ormskirk was narrowly defeated with an apprentice up. Although this bottom-of-the-handicap animal had been several times well beaten with the same boy aboard, connections seem to have anticipated a much-improved showing at Lord Derby's local meeting!

Sloan had earlier offended another Jockey Club member by having the temerity to say that he would need to check his book of rides rather than gratefully accepting a mount on the spot. Long after 1900 such independence of spirit did not sit well with Jockey Club members; in those days the perceived slights were almost certain to come back to haunt him.

Michael Seth-Smith's "A Classic Connection" gives an amazing insight into both Lord Derby and his trainer through their letters. Both are revealed as extraordinarily self-important characters; together they were a rather tricky alliance for anyone to get on the wrong side of. Frank Butters later lost his situation as Derby's trainer on the grounds of inability to train a large string. Lambton was at the time acting as racing manager, and chief witness for the prosecution.<sup>16</sup> This was an extraordinary turn of events, given that Butters had trained four Classic winners for the stable: he went on to train 10 more Classic winners in England, 3 Irish Derby winners, an Arc winner, and became leading trainer eight times!

In 1933, also at Aintree, there was an incident not dissimilar to the Sloan affair. Jockey Cecil Ray was foolish enough to object to a Lord Derby winner; not only was the objection overruled but Ray was reported to the Jockey Club and lost his licence!<sup>17</sup>

During the autumn of 1900 the Prince of Wales's racing manager Lord Marcus Beresford had agreed a retainer of six thousand guineas for Sloan to ride the royal horses in 1901; the inflation multiplier is about 100.<sup>18</sup> As Prince Edward's succession to the throne became imminent, Court circles

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<sup>15</sup> Tod Sloan, By Himself. P. 188

<sup>16</sup> A Classic Connection. Michael Seth-Smith. Pp 104-115

<sup>17</sup> Paddock Personalities. J. Fairfax-Blakeborough c.1935 p.121

<sup>18</sup> Tod Sloan, By Himself. p. 96

likely viewed his more racy associations with increasing dismay. Lord William Beresford, as Sloan's principle advisor, wasn't at all sure that the idea of an American riding for the Heir to the throne would be popular but had resigned himself to giving Sloan three thousand for a second retainer. Unfortunately, Lord William died quite suddenly at the end of December, at the early age of 53.

The prospective Royal retainer perhaps played a part in Sloan's expulsion through a recurrence of the jealousy that destroyed Chifney as favourite of an earlier Heir to the Throne. In 1791 the then Prince of Wales responded to the dubious case raised against his jockey by withdrawing himself from the turf and by awarding to Chifney a generous pension, but the infamous Tranby Croft affair had already shown the incumbent Prince as a frail reed to cling to in the face of any whispering campaign.<sup>19</sup>

By the time Sloan sailed for home at the end of November these storm clouds were thickening. Jockey Club heavyweight Lord Durham had expressed strong disapproval of the gambling aspect of the American invasion in his 1900 Gimcrack speech. Ironically Durham's 1898 speech had been so fulsome in Sloan's praise that Truth Weekly was prompted to wonder if the ducal endorsement might explain the obvious official disregard of the rider's well publicised betting!<sup>20</sup>

Durham was Lambton's elder brother and a future Lord Derby sat alongside him on the Rules Committee. Some years before Durham had made a public attack on Sir George Chetwynd and his jockey Wood; that vendetta had also been launched in the Gimcrack speech.<sup>21</sup> Chetwynd was awarded token damages by the courts but resigned from the Jockey Club in disgust. Wood was not found guilty of any riding offence, but it emerged that he owned several horses and for that he was warned off.

In early December the minutes of a Jockey Club meeting revealed that Sloan, having been found to have backed Codoman, and to have conspired to receive a present from an unconnected party had the horse won, need not apply for a licence to ride in 1901. This seems an extraordinary course of events; Sloan had not been punished by the local stewards and ought not to have been banned without a formal enquiry.

For a party other than the owner to make payment to a rider was clearly a warning off offence at the time, yet those who had conspired to do so

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<sup>19</sup> The Fast Set. G. Plumtre pp. 84-95.

<sup>20</sup> The Story of Your Life. James Lambie p. 251

<sup>21</sup> Racing Reminiscences and Experiences of the Turf. Vol II. Sir George Chetwynd, Bart. P.96

were fined £25 apiece and remained in good standing. Would the Cambridgeshire issue have ever been re-visited had Sloan been wise enough to go to Liverpool to facilitate – and excuse - the miraculous resurrection of Ormskirk in Lord Derby’s heartland?

When Sloan’s chief patron and strongest supporter Lord William Beresford died suddenly at the end of 1900 his lease ownership of 1901 Derby winner Volodyovski terminated. Had he lived he may have obtained for Sloan the amnesty granted to his contemporaries and Sloan would likely have won the Derby.

Lester Reiff was leading rider in 1900 with 143 wins. In 1901 he won the Derby on Volodyovski, but later in the year was deemed to have made insufficient effort in a narrow defeat by his brother at Manchester and was warned off. This ban was patently unsound as the margin of defeat was far too narrow to admit of choreography, and as his mount was notorious as an in-and-out performer. Even though there was once a general acceptance that bans might be imposed on a “last straw” basis, rather than because of any single offence, Reiff’s 26% winning percentage obviously ruled out persistent malpractice.

Lester Reiff was re-instated by the Jockey Club in 1904, but by that time his weight precluded any comeback. Johnny Reiff moved his tack to France where the riding colony included fellow Americans Frank O’Neill, Milton Henry, Winnie O’Connor, Jay Ransch, Nash Turner, B.J. Rigby, and Guy Garner. Whether or not coincidentally, immigrant riders in France also frequently suffered suspensions. The newcomers were so successful that there was even a suggestion that licences be restricted to those that had been resident for three years.

Reiff minor headed the French jockeys’ list in 1902. At the end of the year he and Milton Henry had their licences revoked after non-trier enquiries that were conducted with a similar lack of transparency to the Sloan affair, although both of them were eventually reinstated.<sup>22</sup>

Likely due to Sloan’s treatment, American riders ignored England and preferred to base themselves on the Continent, particularly in France but also in Austria, Germany and Russia. After 1902 only the excellent Danny Maher and the less famous but steady and well regarded J.H. “Skeets” Martin were based in England. Judged by how fondly they have

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<sup>22</sup> Au Coeur des Jockeys. Guy Thibault pp. 68-83



both been reported, they must have better understood the social lay of the land.

Transatlantic riders won eight of the first fourteen Epsom Derbies of the twentieth century, although in 1913 J. Reiff and Craiganour were disqualified. Americans also recorded several Derby placings in the early years of the twentieth century and Frank O'Neill triumphed in 1920. Sloan's mount in 1899 and Martin's, in 1909, both broke down while holding every chance of winning.

The Craiganour affair was widely regarded as a distasteful display of personal antipathy towards the winner's owner by Lord Rosebery and Major Eustace Loder rather than as any objective review of a rough race.<sup>23</sup> Reiff may just have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Owner Ismay had previously formed a liaison with Loder's sister-in-law. That the Ismay family firm owned The Titanic, and that a family member had himself survived that disaster, probably didn't help. In 1913 it was absolutely the convention that jockeys would instigate any enquiry by objecting when they returned to scales, yet there was no objection and it appears that Lord Rosebery set the ball rolling *after the weigh-in was official*.<sup>24</sup> And the photographic evidence shows that Day Comet, despite not being placed in the first four by the judge, was obviously placed and may even have won!<sup>25</sup>

The success of flamboyant colonial upstarts continued to wrangle in some quarters. In 1913 the Jockey Club introduced the "Jersey Act" which effectively barred most American horses, including 1914 Derby winner Durbar II, from the General Stud Book and officially defined them as half-breds.<sup>26</sup> This rather petulant rule was only repealed in the 1960s, admitting some high-class runners such as So Blessed to the General Stud Book. A similar protectionist measure barred American bought yearlings from Auction races in the 1990s, on the ridiculous grounds that their prices might not be accurate, even though the American returns were used in calculating the Median Auction prices.

If there was a conscious campaign amongst racing's grandees to rid English racing of the unwelcome American influence, then – pour encourager les autres - Sloan was an obvious high-profile target. His expulsion may have signified a genuine desire to maintain the integrity of

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<sup>23</sup> The History of the Derby Stakes. Roger Mortimer. Pp. 400-404

<sup>24</sup> The History of the Derby Stakes. P.403

<sup>25</sup> Treasures of the Bloodstock Breeders' Revue. Rasmussen and Napier. P.27

<sup>26</sup> History of the Racing Calendar and Stud Book. C. M. Prior. P.254

the sport, but Ducal outrage at the independence of the colonial peasantry as well as the secret machinations of inner circles at Court seem sure to have played a part.

The bans upon well-connected local riders Madden and Rickaby might argue that British justice is blind. They were re-instated; the “sine die” exclusion that was *belatedly* applied to Sloan without due-process was patently peevish and disproportionate.

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