

The jockey's worst nightmare

By Darren Beadman
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The sight of Simon Mills being hung up in a stirrup iron and dragged over two steeple jumps remains vivid in the memory. The horrifying ordeal took place at the Oakbank jumping festival in South Australia in 1994. It seems like only yesterday.

Maybe that has something to do with the speed with which the shivers went through my body on the Easter weekend when Mills went on that nightmare-inducing ride. It won't be forgotten.

They're the same type of shivers that would surely have pulsed through rival jockeys and no doubt anyone who works with horses. For the spectators on course it was heart-in-mouth stuff.

The same goes with viewers of video footage, which was sent around the world. Mills was lucky to survive. As the grey horse Sir Sagamore leapt two steeples, Mills was flung around like a rag doll.

Miraculously he escaped with a broken arm and several smashed teeth. We should all be so lucky. In September of last year an 18-year-old woman working for English trainer James Given, who started Hugs Dancer in the Caulfield and Melbourne cups, was dragged about 400m with a foot hooked in a stirrup iron.

It was reported Rebecca Davies was riding out to the gallops when a horse in front broke a leg. Davies's horse swerved suddenly and unseated her before bolting. She was kicked in the head several times and lost her life.

Being hung up in a stirrup iron is a horse rider's greatest fear. You know it can happen but it is better forgotten, because if you think about it when riding you may as well not mount up.

From a jockey's view it cannot enter the equation. It's a risk for sure, but better left behind. In my time, I've been involved in more than a dozen falls in trackwork and racing but, praise be to God, I've never been strung up.

I've seen jockeys carted around training tracks, in the early morning when most people are still asleep, and it is not something you want to see. It is eerie. It cramps the stomach. It is awful.

The rider is dragged along. He or she bounces up and down, side to side, helpless. While this is happening, four hooves are pounding like pistons. An animal weighing about 500 kilograms takes fright.

Your head is now in the most dangerous position it can find when it comes to dealing with horses. You are left defenceless but you must ride it out. Through fences or over them. Barbed wire, picket, take your pick. Surely it cannot get any worse for a rider.

Thankfully, former Queensland jockey Adrian Morgante is on the case. Gold Coast-based Morgante has taken time out to develop Toe Stoppers. His aim is to prevent the rider's foot from spearing through the stirrup iron and from getting stuck in the iron.

Toe Stoppers are now being marketed and used around the world. The response has been spectacular. The design has already won five international awards.

The concept is simple and not before time. The leather Toe Stoppers attach to the stirrup iron and mould around the toes of the foot. A bit like a sandal over a boot. They come in seven different sizes.

Let's hope they play a part in reducing human fatalities from riding. Statistics show that over the past 20 years, 410 riders have died in Australia, an average of more than 20 deaths annually. There are about 3000 serious injuries every 12 months.

When you consider the human numbers in pony clubs, eventing, show jumping, thoroughbred racing and those required for stock horses it is not surprising. You can add to the list those that just enjoy riding horses for pleasure.

It would be nice to think Toe Stoppers will play a role in reducing those numbers. As for me, they are still in the testing mode. I used a set at Hawkesbury on Wednesday and the jury is still out.

After riding without them for 25 years I may continue to do so. I'm not alone in the jockey ranks. Melbourne Cup-winning jockey Glen Boss is just one of a host of the boys trying out Toe Stoppers.

Corey Brown is another. He, like me, is unsure about them. Brown rides with the toes in the iron, a worldwide trend with jockeys. Think of a cocky latched onto a perch.

I've tried that approach but subscribe to the theory that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. I'm quite happy to have all but half my feet in the irons. Call me old-fashioned, but it was the way I started off at pony club. It works for me.

The key is making sure the stirrup iron fits the feet. Use irons that are too big and you are asking for big trouble. The type where you get hung up. Too big and the foot easily slips through.

That's why size is important. I allow two fingers' width to the outside of each iron. It allows for leverage. I suppose it is a confidence thing. Those who ride with toes on the irons are comfortable with that style but I'm not.

The Toe Stoppers would create a similar type of sensation. For riders starting out they should be used. For those like myself it amounts to doing what is comfortable and what feels right. At this point, Toe Stoppers aren't for me but that's not to say things won't change.

Adrian Morgante is to be applauded for taking safety around the horse to a new level.

As told to Craig Young