



Missed Opportunities

Someone once said, towards the end of their life, that their biggest regret was over the things they hadn't done rather than those they had.

Never has this seemed more apt than as I write.

A very good friend of mine once suggested, in a moment of counsel, that I lacked courage in certain areas.

The small element of consolation in that remark was in the word 'certain'. Given that his behaviour could in many respects be interpreted as rash – he had no hesitation in his glory days of putting tens of £1,000s on a horse - he could hardly be viewed as the great arbiter of sound judgement.

But on reflection there have been missed opportunities in my life – ones that could have resulted in something special had I had more self-belief.

At the risk of being accused of name dropping, one of the great benefits of spending my formative years with *The Sunday Times* was the opportunities it presented to meet people, from all walks of life.

As some of you may know I used to hang out with the late Mel Smith of 'Not The Nine O'Clock News' fame.

There was one occasion when Mel was commissioned to record a comedy song, entitled Julie Andrews' Greatest Tits. You won't be surprised to learn this ill-conceived enterprise sunk without race, but it did involve time in the recording studio with Roger Taylor of Queen, who was producing the song.

Mel liked me to come along on his various forays, and so I was hanging out with them well into the small hours. My job, as it turned out, was to dash out to some interesting areas of the local vicinity to keep Roger and Mel supplied with 'provisions'.

Towards the end of the night he took out a cassette and played us Queen's latest song. It was Under Pressure, with David Bowie.

Towards the end I said to Roger it needed a sax solo to wrap it up. He agreed and asked if I played. I didn't and he said that's a shame. I subsequently ascertained from Mel that he meant it, having enjoyed our time together.

The reason that this resonated was because of the day I went to the music teacher at school, as a 14-year-old, to ask if I could learn the saxophone. He asked if I owned one, which I didn't, and that was the end of the discussion.

The other missed opportunity related to a train journey from Sussex to London.

I used to have a cottage in Peasmarsh in Sussex and occasionally caught the train from Ashford to London.

One morning I walked into the first-class compartment and there, sitting alone, was Paul McCartney.

As it turned out I said the perfect thing – “Oh f..., do you want to be alone?”

It was perfect, because I swore – which he does a lot – and second it showed I respected his personal space.

I can still to this day recall virtually every word of our conversation – he put me at my ease in less than two minutes – and as we pulled into Waterloo, an hour later, he asked what I was doing for the day. I told him that I had a lunch appointment, as it turned out with one of the dullest people I had ever known.

That’s a shame, he said. He was hoping I could help him choose a birthday present for Linda. I said I didn’t want to be a pest. He said “you’re not a pest” and said goodbye as I left him to walk his way down the corridor. Singing. Yes, one of the greatest musicians of our generation. Singing.

I was later told that Paul liked to employ people who lived locally and in those relatively early days acted positively to chance meetings, preferring them to the interview process.

As an up-and-coming young journalist he seemed very interested in my work, asking me about my background and suchlike. Who knows how things might have turned out, but it was an opportunity missed.

Why have I told you these stories?

It’s because a few days ago I lost my focus. There is no excuse for that. I have a team here that will do anything to support me in my quest for winners.

But as so often happens when I am on a tough writing assignment – in this case the *National Hunt Guide* – it’s very difficult to keep your eyes on everything else that is happening.

Having devoted so much energy a few weeks ago to the *Autumn Guide*, I made a pledge that I would support the horses in multiples as and when they appeared.

For a while now I have had a strong feeling that a big win was due to come my way. To this end I have placed exotics as they are called in the States – multiples – when the occasion seemed to warrant it.

They have proved very successful, especially taking advantage of Betfred’s bonus for single winners and other benefits. I won a few thousand from the local shop last winter and something similar, when they let me, on my internet accounts.

Yet last Friday did not start well. I awoke still feeling tired and did not adhere to my normal routine.

I allowed myself – and note I am not passing the blame to anyone here – to become distracted and following a very busy week, writing thousands of words, I was knackered.

There were three horses from the *Autumn Guide* running, but I only saw two of them. Dave Dexter, Fashion’s Star and Raakib Alhawa. And it was the last-named that I missed.

I also had news for Lucky Lucky Man, 25/1 in the morning. My bet would have been a Yankee on all four at 25/1 twice, 10/1 and 9/2 (morning prices). Furthermore I would have had it four times, albeit to modest sums.

Although I use Horse Tracker you can’t beat having what I call a spotter – someone with the dedication and commitment to pore over the day’s runners or, in my case, remind me what I’ve said about horses in the past.

This needs someone with a fine racing brain – someone who has a fly-paper memory.

The trouble is it's hard to remember everything. I recall Willie Carson once riding a horse for us for the second time and the first thing he said as he came into the paddock was "OK. What did I tell you about this horse last time I rode her?".

I have tried to address this problem and ensure things are not forgotten or overlooked in my services.

For example the underlying principle of the *Weekend Card* is continuity – we have a feature devoted to reflections on how previous selections performed. I am always reminding my team how important this is.

Yet a few days ago I did not follow my usual routine – a run through the early entries a few days before, to note horses from my publications and then check them the previous evening (over a glass of wine) before refining the selections for my services in the morning.

The bit that I didn't bother with was the personal betting. I was simply overwhelmed.

I should add that it was still a good day – a profit was made – but it should have been tens of thousands. I had already done all the hard work.

I once asked Luca Cumani why he didn't bet. "It's a different job", he said. And he is right.

I am not sure what the ideal psychological profile is of a professional backer. I have thought about it many times, but there has to be routine and dedication, to the extent that nothing else must be allowed to get in your way.

Even now, writing this, I have an eye on the events taking place at Uttoxeter and Hamilton. As backers every day, without exception, there is an opportunity to land a life-changing sum of money.

That doesn't mean we have to bet every day, but the opportunity is there if things fall into place.

There won't be a person reading this who has not got a similar story to tell. Indeed, it may console some of you to learn that after almost 50 years in the business, and with a team to help me, I still get it wrong.

It still hurts, more so because I had sensed a massive payday was around the corner. I had put in the hours and autumn is always a profitable time of year for me.

I have at least ensured in recent times that I say yes rather than no to opportunities offered to me, however busy my workload. That has at least improved.

But when it comes to punting I must learn to have more faith in my judgement and commitment to the principles that have served me well.

By all means come back to me on this one. It really is quite important.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marten Julian". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'M'.