

Four days that changed a life: How Rachael Blackmore tasted greatness at Cheltenham 2021

“If I think of myself five or six years ago it is an unbelievable position to be in. Just getting a ride at Cheltenham was a massive deal at one stage and then you go and you have 16 or 17 rides after things snowballed.”

Those were the [words](#) of Rachael Blackmore *before* last year’s Cheltenham Festival. It would have been interesting to hear her perspective a few days later, after enjoying the greatest four days in her sporting life. Claiming six Cheltenham victories, Blackmore became the first female rider to win the coveted Leading Jockey accolade at the Festival.

Despite being catapulted into sporting superstardom, Blackmore has remained as modest as ever, revelling in the glory of her victories whilst never losing sight of her privileged position. The 29-year-old is reluctant to fly the flag for women in horse racing – she considers her role in horse racing as, simply, a jockey – but that does not take away from the fact that thousands of girls were inspired by her achievements in the Cotswolds last spring. Having grown up on a dairy farm in the rural town of Killenaule, County Tipperary, it has been quite a journey.

Blackmore was a successful, well-respected jockey before the 2021 Cheltenham Festival, but no one could have anticipated what was around the corner. This is the story of one woman’s rise to greatness in racing – and it all happened in the space of a remarkable 96 hours.

Extraordinary form in extraordinary times

For those at the top of the sport, day one at the Cheltenham Festival can make or break a season. Any failure to land a win on the opening afternoon piles pressure on trainers and jockeys for the rest of the event, and that pressure would have been felt most by Blackmore, who was the heavy favourite in the [racing betting](#) to win the Champion Hurdle on board *Honeysuckle*.

The Henry de Bromhead-trained mare is a key supporting character in Blackmore's story. To this day, the eight-year-old remains unbeaten in all 14 of her outings over hurdles, but last spring the Champion Hurdle was viewed as her toughest test yet. Some felt she may struggle in such a high-profile race, but those nay-sayers were proved wrong as Blackmore guided her expertly to victory in the feature race of day one.

Winning such a prestigious title was, in itself, a tremendous achievement for Blackmore, and if that had been her only triumph at last year's Festival, she would have no-doubt gone home happy. However, the Champion Hurdle sparked a winning run that only ended because they ran out of races to win.

The power of momentum can never be underestimated in sport, and Blackmore rode the crest of the wave in picking up victories with *Bob Olinger* in the Ballymore Novices Hurdle, *Sir Gerhard* in the Champion Bumper, *Allaho* in the prestigious Ryanair Chase, *Tellmesomethinggirl* in the Mares' Novices Hurdle, and finally *Quilixios* in the Triumph Hurdle.

The only downside to all this is that there were no spectators in the stands to roar her home. The coronavirus pandemic wreaked havoc with horse racing, and the empty concourses was one of the enduring images of last year's Festival.

In those difficult times, racing fans needed a story that would thrill them, and help them forget about the misery of the outside world, even if it was just for four days. Blackmore provided that excitement, as millions watched on

from their homes, living every moment with her.

The road ahead

We all know what followed. As if her glorious run at Cheltenham wasn't enough, Blackmore went on to win the Grand National the following month, completing a series of wins that even her most optimistic of supporters could not have seen coming.

Now, as Cheltenham looms large on the horizon, Blackmore heads to the Festival with a weight of expectation like never before. Having been made to wait in the shadows for so long, she is now the one in the limelight, and it will be fascinating to see how she performs under such intense scrutiny.

She has trusty *Honeysuckle* on her side as always, ready and waiting to take the Champion Hurdle by storm once again. Who knows, if the devastating duo can get the win on day one again, it could spark a similar run of irresistible form. With Blackmore, you can't rule anything out.

Through all the success of 2021, and whatever else may lie in store for her as this career unfolds over the coming years, you feel that Blackmore's feet will remain firmly planted on the ground. Her gratefulness for the position she's found herself in will never wane. Beneath all the titles and adulation, the love of horse racing felt by that young girl growing up in Killenaule still shines through.

"We're so lucky to be involved in the sport we're in. I get to do this as my job," [she told the Irish Times](#) last year with a glint in her eye. "It's an incredible position to be in. Horses are beautiful, intelligent animals and I get to work with them and get to share incredible days with them. It's just ... it's fantastic."



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