

Perspective

THE BREWIN DOLPHIN MAGAZINE WINTER 2022

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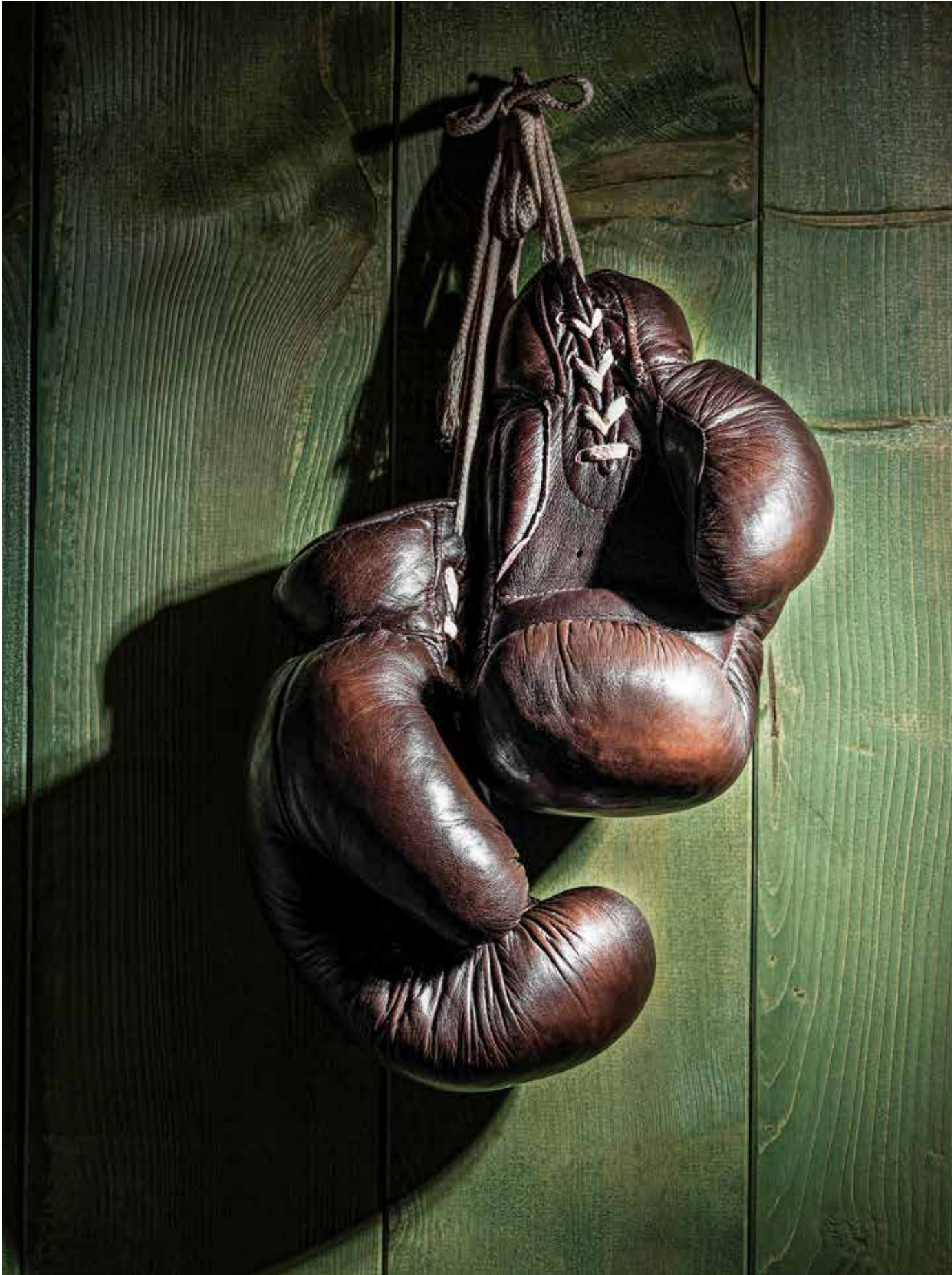


Life after the extraordinary

What to do after an extraordinary early career
comes to an end?



BREWIN DOLPHIN



LIFE AFTER THE EXTRAORDINARY

Many sports stars or creative types enjoy wildly successful careers early on in life. But how do they readjust once those careers are over? *Ryan Herman* finds out

You may have won the Grand National, played the lead in *Swan Lake*, or performed to millions at music festivals around the world.

But once you've fulfilled your childhood dreams as an adult, what happens when you can no longer rely on your physical attributes or the support of adoring fans to make a living? It can be hard enough making the transition from one walk of life into another. But that is especially true when you've enjoyed adulation and fame on a sporting or theatrical stage.

Boxer Sugar Ray Leonard once famously said: "There is nothing in life that can compare to becoming a world champion, having your hand raised in that moment of glory, with thousands, millions of people cheering you on."

He would know: Leonard suffered from depression and drug addiction following his first retirement, aged 32. He only found some sense of purpose and closure after making several returns to the ring before finally hanging up his gloves, aged 40.



BOXING GREAT SUGAR RAY LEONARD, BELOW LEFT, IN HIS FINAL BOUT IN 1996, AGED 40.

A SECOND ACT

But if one can come to terms with the fact that such a career can end quite abruptly, and will typically end in your 20s or 30s, then the dedication and discipline required to succeed in one field can in turn become assets in another vocation.

Leigh Thomas, director of global clients and categories for Facebook, is an example of how you can succeed in tech without going down the more conventional route of coding or being a university graduate.

Thomas was a ballet dancer for 20 years. However, she only started taking lessons following medical advice.

As a young child in South Africa, Thomas suffered from femoral anteversion. This meant she couldn't walk properly, had long spells on crutches or in a wheelchair, and it affected the development of her muscles.

"The surgeon said to my mum, 'Send her to ballet because that will get her some muscles back in her legs,'" she recalls.

Thomas instantly took to dancing. As a teenager, she joined the Cape Town City Ballet, was the lead in several productions, and turned her passion into a profession.

But by her mid-20s, she started to think seriously about life beyond treading the boards. There is an oft-used expression that 'the dancer dies twice' – the first time following their last performance. But Thomas was more pragmatic than dramatic about her future.

"From a macro context, it was during the end of apartheid," Thomas recalls. "Up to that point, you had a salary and a good support structure if you worked in the arts. There was a perception that ballet was a white, elitist art form. We did what we could to overcome that, but it was still considered an indulgence."

"Contrast that with people on the streets who didn't have water or electricity; so, government funding, quite rightly, focused on tackling societal issues."

Thomas was keen to join another creative industry and started at the bottom by making teas and doing filing for a >



› global marketing agency. “Everything in ballet revolves around commitment. When people tell me they work really hard, well I was working six or seven days a week. I would start at 10am and finish at 11pm,” she adds.

Other transferable skills helped her to succeed at M&C Saatchi in London, before becoming CEO at creative agency Dare, and then joining Facebook in 2016. “I think understanding and empathising with other human beings is absolutely core. Being a ballerina means putting yourself in the shoes of another,” says Thomas.

“But also, you’re only as good as the people around you. That’s what I learned working in the corps de ballet or as a senior soloist or in a pas de deux. It’s absolutely about being able to trust people and work as a team.”

TEAM PLAYERS

There are countless examples of those who played in team sports and had successful careers elsewhere. Indeed, a host of rugby and cricket players have gone into wealth management. They include Welsh rugby international Andrew Lewis and Glamorgan fast bowler Andrew Davies.

Being a former sports star can obviously help to open doors. But perhaps the greatest problem after you retire is that you simply miss the buzz of playing, fighting or riding.

That was the case for Richard Dunwoody. A two-time Grand National winner, Cheltenham Gold Cup winner and three-time champion jockey, he was forced to retire in 1999 following a neck injury.

It took Dunwoody several years to really find his feet. At first, he started a sports marketing agency. But on reflection says, “I really wasn’t cut out to work in an office.”

He then became a pundit for the BBC, adding that “it was bad enough watching AP McCoy ride winners when I was up against him. Watching him ride winners and then having to say something nice about it really wasn’t for me!”

Then an opportunity arose to lead riding tours for adventure travel company Wild Frontiers, which has taken him to Kurdistan, Argentina, the Andes and Afghanistan. During those tours, he started taking pictures on an Instamatic camera. “I kept coming back with all these rubbish photos. But photography was something I’d been interested in since school.”

In 2011, Dunwoody enrolled for a year-long course at the Specs Photography School in Paris. “It was probably one of the best years I’ve had since retiring.” He is now a professional photographer. Dunwoody also uses his extraordinary images, taken at events such as the Mongol Derby, in websites that he designs for businesses in the equine industry.

But he also says that in those early years he would have benefited from going to business school. In turn, that would have helped him make better-informed decisions when launching his marketing agency.

Life as a professional sportsperson, dancer or musician is all-consuming and making the most of your physical talents can leave you without any discernible business skills.

A report published in 2018 estimated that 500 former Premier League footballers who played in the 1990s collectively lost £1bn on bad investments and tax advice. Football players are not typically known for their business acumen, but there are a few recent examples that bucked that trend.

One player who had his eye on the future was ex-Tottenham Hotspur and Watford goalkeeper Espen Baardsen. He used his spare time to learn about the money markets and, having fallen out of love with football in 2002, retired aged 25 to become a fund manager.

Then there’s Mathieu Flamini, who went from midfield enforcer at Arsenal and AC Milan to environmental entrepreneur. The sight of plastic bags floating in the sea

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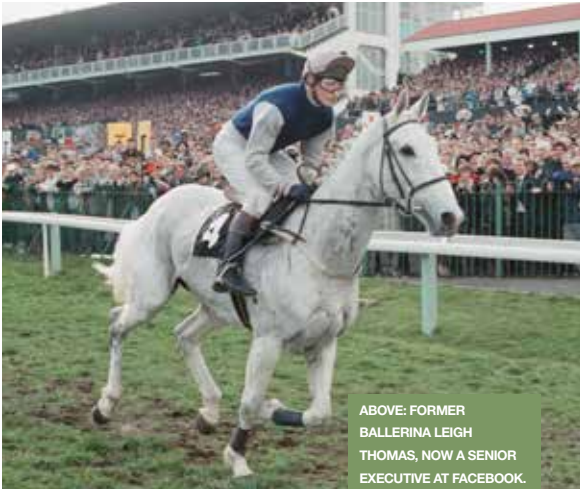
while growing up in Corsica left a lasting impression on Flamini. “You could see we were not going in the right direction. So, I decided to use my platform as an athlete to drive change,” he said.

In 2008, he co-founded GF Biochemicals, which makes a crude oil substitute used in producing household goods. While reports claiming he is a billionaire are off target, the forecasted growth in biofuels may eventually see Flamini

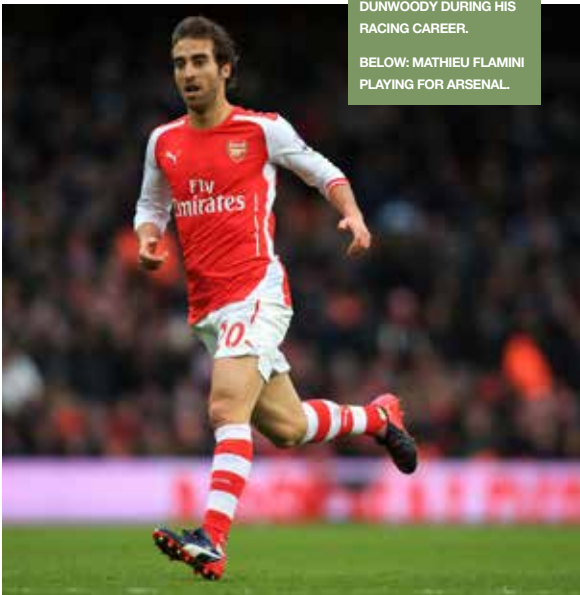
become the world’s wealthiest ex-footballer.

One could reasonably argue that his life after football has been more remarkable than his playing career.

What Flamini and others demonstrate is that just because somebody has lived out a dream by their 20s, it doesn’t mean everything that follows must pale by comparison. There is life after the extraordinary for those willing to embrace change. ✍



ABOVE: FORMER BALLERINA LEIGH THOMAS, NOW A SENIOR EXECUTIVE AT FACEBOOK.



MIDDLE: RICHARD DUNWOODY DURING HIS RACING CAREER.
BELOW: MATHIEU FLAMINI PLAYING FOR ARSENAL.



A PHOTOGRAPH OF CAMARGUE HORSES BY FORMER JOCKEY RICHARD DUNWOODY

Photography: Alamy, Reuters, Richard Dunwoody