

Mike Cattermole

Photography by Jules Beresford

Mike Cattermole is perhaps one of the most eligible bachelors in the world of racing, presenting a tough challenge to the likes of Mr R Walsh for the title of 'silver fox.' Dubbed the 'Face of The Flat' for the hazy summer months, he can be seen on Channel 4 presenting numerous Saturday meetings, alongside his equally glamorous co-host Emma Spencer. 'Catt's' distinctive deep, classless accent can also be heard sounding out from the commentator's box at countless Flat and National Hunt meetings, the length and breadth of the country. Ironically, horses are at the centre of the career of a man who is not only heavily allergic to them, but is also truthfully rather wary of the four-legged beasts. Suzie Dowty for *The Racing Magazine*, caught up with Mike on his career, his spell as agent to Willie Carson, and his brief stint acting alongside thespians at the Halifax Playhouse...

Early days

Mike was born in Scotland in 1961, into a type of family that typical racing folk would refer to as being distinctly 'non-horsey.' It could be argued that his only connection to horses, aside from his father's love of racing, was his grandfather's job, working for the *Horse & Hound*.

During the mid '60s, the Cattermoles moved to London, and it was there that years later Mike would learn to ride in Richmond Park. Unfortunately, itchy eyes and a streaming nose were far from the perfect combination to accompany his noble steed and it soon became clear that Mike was never going to be trackside of the rails.

His introduction into the addictive world of racing began when he was 8 years old. "My father was the one that got me into racing, through watching The Grand National on the television. I can clearly recall when 'Gay Trip' won in 1970, and 'Red Rum' in 1973. I just remember thinking what a fantastic and exciting sport it was and what heroes the jockeys were." Ironically, Mike became aware of the Gold Cup in 1978, the year that John Francome won on 'Midnight Court.' Little did he know that one day, the legendary Francome would become a close colleague and a great friend.

"The first racecourse I ever went to was Uttoxeter and I can still remember how big the horses were! We were living in Derby at the time, constantly moving round because of my father's job." From then on, Mike was hooked. When the family moved to Lincoln, he used to cycle to Market Rasen to watch the racing, and would spend £1.50 per issue on 'Pacemaker' magazine, which seemed like a fortune at the time, especially to a struggling student.

"Pacemaker was a lovely glossy magazine filled with stallion adverts of horses being posed for shots along with their race record and record of stud; I found that all fascinating."

After graduating from Keele University in Staffordshire, Mike followed in his father's footsteps and pursued a career in the Civil Service. His degree in Economics and History secured him an unbelievably boring job in the National Audit Office. Unsurprisingly, this did not last more than 18 months. "I went to Epsom for the first time in 1984 and saw 'Secreto' beat 'El Gran Senor' by a short head in a very controversial Derby. It was then that I realised I needed to get the racing bug out of my system, so I went for an interview with the legendary Reg Griffin at *Timeform*, which is comparable to the university of horseracing. Reg grilled me with 50 questions and I got the job, and so, taking a massive pay cut I moved to Halifax to pursue a career in racing journalism."



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From journalist to jockey's agent

Working at *Timeform* from 1984 to 1986 was a dream come true for the young Mike, whose job it was to write the comments for the weekly 'blackbook' and *Racehorses Annual*, for the 4 year-olds and upwards on The Flat. Although not leading a particularly glamorous lifestyle in Halifax, living in an attic room with no central heating and relying on a small salary, it was a fantastic couple of years of opportunity. His colleague Jim McGrath provided a fantastic bank of knowledge for the relatively inexperienced Mike to digest; "It was very helpful to watch Jim and my other colleagues in action, they had years of experience and came from good horsey backgrounds. They taught me the mechanics behind racing and helped me to understand the handicapping system. I owe them for everything that I know.

"I remember that we used to watch the racing at work; I just thought this is my kind of job – I am getting paid to watch my favourite sport!" Whilst in Halifax, Catt, as he became more commonly known, provided something of an amusement to the Yorkshire girls, perhaps owing to his southern accent; "I love the Yorkshire women, you always know where you stand with Yorkshire girls!" In addition to entertaining the local lasses, he also tried his hand at amateur dramatics; joining the local thespians at the Halifax Playhouse. This provided a great source of entertainment for his racing colleagues, who would come and watch Catt perform in plays such as 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie', purely "so they could take the mickey!"

As his career progressed, Catt left *Timeform* and moved to London to a post at the *Sporting Life Weekender*, starting at the same time as Simon Holt. "We worked long hours for three days, and after the paper was printed on the Wednesday, we had the rest of the week off. This was great, because I was able to get another job working for *Racecall*, in the days when people would ring up for race commentaries. I worked with a great team of youngsters including Simon Holt, Cornelius Lysaght, and broadcasting legends Peter Bromley and Raleigh Gilbert, and was able to do some broadcasting."

It was around this time that Jim McGrath, recommended Catt to Willie Carson, who was looking for an agent to replace his dutiful wife, Elaine.

Personality Profile

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"When he asked me to be his agent, I couldn't believe it, the guy was a legend. I greatly admired him because he came from nothing; he was not born and bred into the world of racing, instead, he made his own way from humble origins. I jumped at the chance and we spent five enjoyable seasons together from 1989 to 1993.

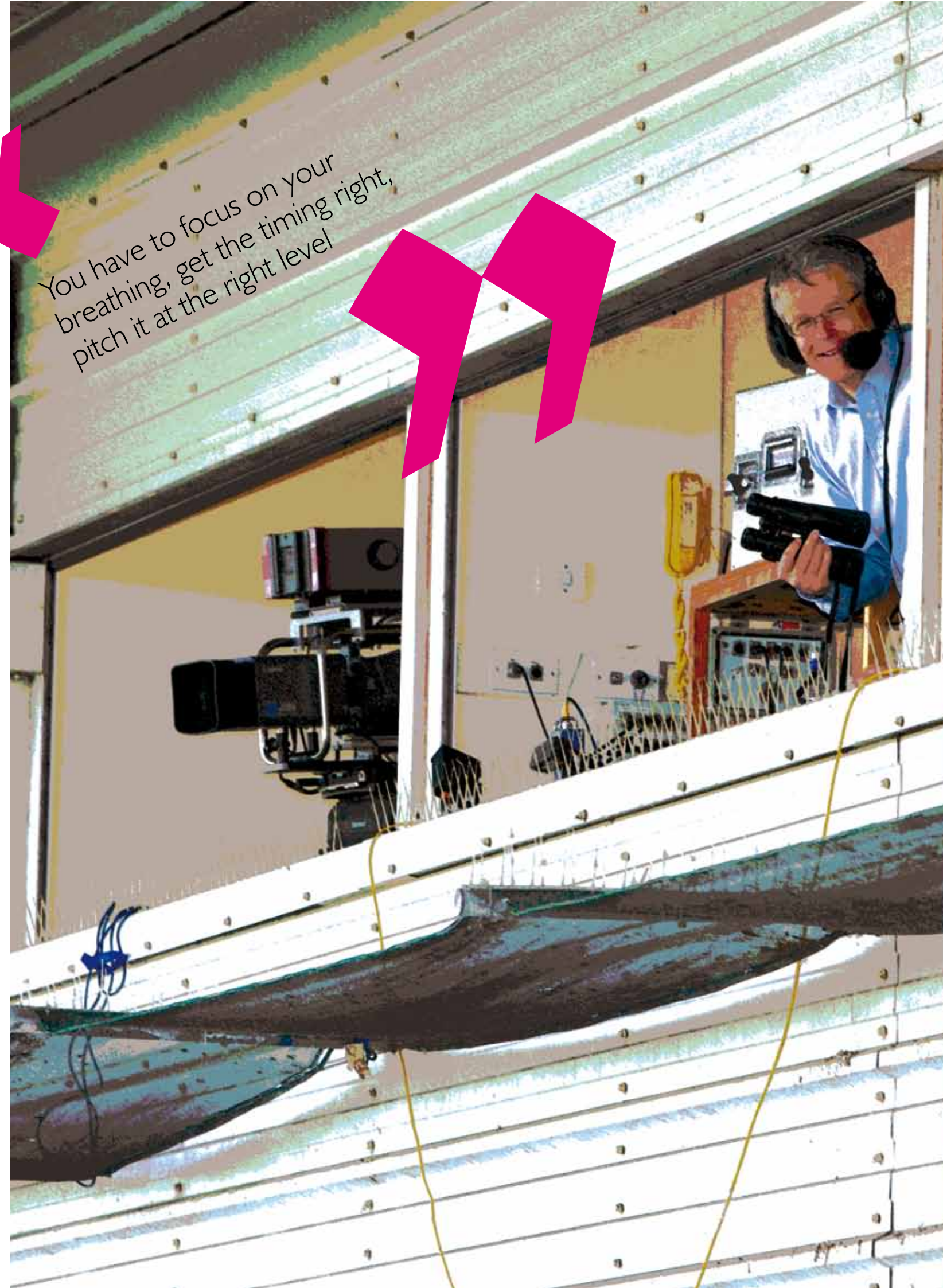
"At first I thought that all I had to do was to receive calls, but it was an incredibly demanding job. At the time, I was still working as a journalist for the *Sporting Life* newspaper, so there would be an hour in the morning where I would've missed out on booking rides as I was making my way across London on the train. He was not very happy about this, but it was the way it had to be. Initially, Willie said to me, 'Okay just get me on what you can, I want to get fit.' So I would put him on all sorts of horses, trained by relatively unknown trainers. He used to say to me; 'That trainer I've just ridden for... no one has ever heard of, except for you!'

He would constantly upset owners by telling them that their horses were no good, so they wouldn't want him back. I would then be oblivious to this and would ring up on numerous occasions for the ride again, to which they would reply; 'Oh he wants to ride it now does he?'

"We had a very amusing relationship; he could be tricky, but I was very fond of him. I did my best and I think he appreciated that, but I know he thought I was not ruthless enough and continually referred to me in a rather patronising manner as a 'nice boy'. I wanted to make him Champion Jockey again, but sadly I failed. Pat Eddery was too strong and the closest we came, was to within 10 winners. Pat was diplomatic, Willie was Willie and this undoubtedly cost him rides.

"We had a great era together and I got some great outside rides for him. However, being a pressman, a lot of people were suspicious of me to begin with, but it was fantastic because I suddenly found myself part of the inside fabric of it all, whereas a lot of journalists are continually on the outside, looking in. Our partnership came to an end in '93. Willie kept saying that he wanted to retire and I was keen to start commentating, so we went our separate ways. The year after we parted, the bugger went and won the Derby again in '94 on 'Erhaab' – ironically I was hosting the press conference and he kept pointing at me and telling everyone; 'He sacked me – he-he!'

"I then had a brief stint helping out as agent to Lester Piggott. When I say brief, I mean 3 weeks. I woke up one winter morning to a call from Hong Kong; 'Is that Mike Cattermole?' Speaking. 'It's Lester.' He caught me unawares and I replied 'Lester who!' I wanted to concentrate on commentating, but managed to book him a winner in a seller for Jimmy Fitzgerald and a decent ride in the 2000 Guineas. When Willie heard, he phoned me up and said; 'I hear Grandpa's signed you up now?' Their rivalry was legendary in the '70s and it was clear Willie was slightly annoyed.



Catt the commentator

Catt's velvety broadcasting voice propelled him forward into a career in commentating in 1993. His experience of race reading for the *Sporting Life* enabled him to watch a race unfold and learn the colours of the jockeys' silks. It was originally Simon Holt and Jim McGrath that encouraged him to give it a go. "My first commentary was at Fontwell, I was very nervous, particularly when the guy in charge offered the encouraging words of 'Don't f**k it up!'

"When I look back on my earlier commentaries, if I'm being critical, there were lots of 'ums and ahs'. It is a tough job, where you are constantly in fear of failure. People are very quick to criticise commentators, no one would ever say to me that was a great commentary, well done. But this keeps you on your toes. I am incredibly critical myself and I would never get in the car after a day's work and think that I had done a good job. Having said that, I was pleased with my effort on The Gold Cup this year, considering I could hardly draw breath as they were lining up!

"Adrenalin sometimes brings out the best in you, but if you sound nervous, people are going to hear it through your commentary. You have to focus on your breathing, get the timing right, pitch it at the right level and of course, drink plenty of water. At Cheltenham this year, I had a spotter – they are useful if you miss something blindly obvious, or if something is making headway that you have not seen, but generally you have to forget they are there.

"The build up between 'Kauto' and 'Denman' was so huge that I think it really got to me; I knew I could not afford to make a mistake. When 'Kauto' made his big blunder I must have caught it through my binoculars, because I didn't realise until after the race that the cameras had hardly captured it. I love commentating at Cheltenham, it is such a privilege and I am very thankful to Ed Gillespie for continually having me back.

"Unfortunately not everyday is like commentating at Cheltenham; it might be a small meeting at somewhere relatively obscure, but you still have to be on your mettle. Racing was running late one evening at Windsor, and I was chatting outside the weighing room, probably to a girl knowing me. All of a sudden the race was off, they had made up for lost time without me realising. I think the relaxed atmosphere at Windsor had caught me off guard!

"I sprinted across the paddock and up to the commentator's box in time to call home the last two furlongs. I was so out of breath that Christian, the on Course Director thought that I was having an anxiety attack. However, this opinion was more preferable over others who said it sounded as though someone was performing some sort of sex act on me in the commentator's box!

"There have also been two occasions when I have called home the wrong horse, which is the most horrendous feeling; your heart just sinks and you feel awful. Again I was at Windsor and I was conducting the auction after the racing. I was browsing through the list of lots and did not concentrate properly on learning the colours. There were two horses in yellow and I called home the wrong one – I could have kicked myself.

"The other was a more serious blunder. I was live on Channel 4 at Newbury in December 2007. At the time, my personal life was going through a bit of turmoil and it really had an effect on my work. The horse in question was Khyber Kim ridden by Mick Fitzgerald, in the days when Nicky Henderson trained him. For the majority of the race I was correct, but when they suddenly started jumping the last flight of hurdles, I thought that Khyber Kim had become this 150/1 outsider ridden by an amateur called Michael Lurcock.

"I was saying what a massive upset this is, but then I realised my mistake – that half way up the run in, that it was in fact Khyber Kim who was drawing clear, which in fact was a great training performance by Nicky Henderson to bring him back, after such a lengthy break! I just felt awful, and could not understand how I could have mistaken Fitz's style for a relatively unknown amateur.

"I guess this is a small percentage compared to the 7,000 races that I have called, but the worrying thing is that, like a jockey expecting a fall, you never know when the next moment is going to happen. As a commentator you get slated on the online chat forums, the best thing to do is either avoid them or try to laugh. They get very personal. The trouble is that because it is now such a gambling orientated sport, and there is so much in running gambling, when commentators make mistakes it can sometimes cost punters a fortune. But they should not rely solely on us; they too should have a vague knowledge of colours and by studying the form, should know which horses tend to be front-runners and those, which play a waiting game.

Personality Profile



"I think that commentating on National Hunt is slightly easier for me. It is slower and suits my style because I am not one of the quicker callers, but it is probably harder because there is more going on; more fallers, more being pulled up and more horses being hampered. I would say it is easier to get into a rhythm during a Flat race.

"In the early days, I would rest the paper open on the passenger seat and steal occasional glances in order to learn the colours – definitely not in the Highway Code! I do a lot of work beforehand, learning the runners' form, so I can work out where horses will be ideally placed throughout the race. The best time to learn them is after the runners leave the paddock – any sooner and you will forget them. If owners have two horses running on the same day, then there is a risk that you might muddle them up – it helps if you can relate a horse to its silks. For example, if a horse is called 'Tiger Trail,' and his colours are orange and black, then it certainly aids my memory. But honestly, there is no particular technique that I can rely on."

As for recurring nightmares? Catt apparently still suffers from the anxiety dream, which all commentators are

affected by. You know the one: he turns up at the racecourse and can't find the commentator's box and then someone says; 'They are under starters orders and they're off.' Sometimes in the dream, if he's lucky he will find the box, but it will not have a window. Anxiety dream? More like anxiety nightmare.

Catt has commentated in numerous races including The Grand National three times. "You either commentate from the stands or in the country. If you are in the country, the moment before you get handed over to can be incredibly nerve-racking as they thunder down towards you." The Derby is still a major ambition and goal for Catt, which he hopefully will conquer one day.

The Face of The Flat

In 1995, Catt began presenting, emerging from the commentator's box to stand in front of the camera. Since then he has worked for *The Racing Channel*, *Channel 4 Racing*, *Attheraces*, and *Sky Sports News*. Currently he is the lead co-presenter for Channel 4 alongside Emma Spencer. The new partnership has gone well, but there was more fuel for Mike's 'anxiety dreams' in March at the Meydan racecourse in Dubai. The main race was eight minutes late and there was a triple photo finish, and they were forced to go off air before they could give the result to the viewers in England. However awful they felt, there was nothing that they could have done; it was late Saturday night in England and no one was around to make the decision to give them extra time on air.

"Racing reaches quite a big audience, and I find it hilarious that I sometimes get recognised and asked to sign autographs and have photos taken. When York was abandoned a few years ago due to flooding, I spent the day in the town and was stopped every five minutes. It was quite comical really and I felt like Tom Cruise for the day! People who enjoy watching me presenting, stop me in the supermarket occasionally; however, I know that for every person that is complimentary, no doubt, someone walks past thinking the complete opposite!

"Commentating is great because you are your own boss, but I love broadcasting for Channel 4. You are part of a seemingly endless team, including producers, directors, soundmen, cameramen... the list goes on, and in order to pull it off, you have to place an enormous amount of trust in each other. It is a great team feeling when a broadcast goes well, and I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we all admire each other and trust each other to do a proper job."

Check out Catt's website at www.MikeCattermole.com

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