

STRAIGHT TALKING

by Mark



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A little bit of Heaven right here on Earth

TRAVEL, they say, broadens the mind and I am sure that is generally true although there is many a time, when the season is over, that I would be happy not to have my mind broadened. I'd often rather just lie on a beach, veg-etate, or go cycling, and Deirdre is usually the one who looks for there to be a horse at the end of each and every journey.

This year, however, I succumbed and agreed to spend some of my winter break doing what we, in the veterinary profession, call CPD – continued professional development.

First we visited Las Vegas, not for the slot machines and the roulette tables but for the National Finals Rodeo championship (pictured right). What an eye-opener.

I had seen rodeo before, in Australia, but I either wasn't paying attention due to too many other things on my mind – Double Trigger and the Melbourne Cup – or it just wasn't as good as the NFR.

Bull and bronc riding seem to be considered to be the highlight of

the eight disciplines, but for me it was the tremendous standard of horsemanship in the other events – team roping (header and heeler), steer roping, steer wrestling, tie-down roping, and barrel racing – along with that among the ancillary workers, such as outriders, which really appealed to me. That said, the athleticism, strength and sheer bravery of those riding bulls and bucking horses has to be seen to be believed.

It is wonderful to watch a completely different equestrian discipline and see some different ways of doing things, and it was also very worthwhile to see another event which principally revolves around horses and see that there are ways to make it particularly entertaining without relying entirely on betting and the sale of food and beverage.

The NFR provides three hours of non-stop, fast and furious, entertainment and attracts around 20,000 spectators, plus extensive television coverage, for 10 nights in a row. Every racecourse manager in Britain should make the effort to see it. I'll certainly go back and I



now have it on my bucket list to visit the Calgary Stampede but, unfortunately, that takes place in mid-summer and I may have to wait a few years.

NOW I am in New Zealand and here we have been looking at the much more familiar sport of horseracing, although we did take some time to watch Angus play polo and, in so doing, have another look behind the scenes at another equestrian discipline that fascinates me.

Our trip here has been organised by my friend and classmate from Glasgow Veterinary School's class of 1983, Douglas Black, and he has proved to be a great guide and ambassador for New Zealand racing and breeding.

He did, of course, take us to see racing, including the G1 Zabeel

Classic, at Ellerslie and I was most impressed by the facilities there and the track. But it was the opportunity to get behind the scenes a bit that I found most enlightening.

I had the opportunity to watch Doug at work with mares on a couple of stud farms, to meet Peter Vela of New Zealand Bloodstock and to see yearlings at his Pencarrow Stud. Their yearlings sell a little earlier than ours in the northern hemisphere and I was very impressed with how well they looked and how well-grown they were for their age. I also witnessed some unique methods of shoeing yearlings, some fencing styles that I may well introduce at Park Farm, and some other little tricks of the trade which might come in handy.

At Cambridge Stud I also saw some nice yearlings and was given the opportunity to see the legendary, and recently retired, stallion Zabeel. He looks very well for his 27 years but it is, of course, unlikely that I will ever get the opportunity to see him again.

I had lunch with Murray Baker, trainer of It's A Dundeel, and watched Doug do his rounds at Te Akau Stables with trainer Jason Bridgeman, but perhaps the highlight of the trip, if there can be one, was my visit to David and Karen Ellis's Te Akau Stud. David has a magnificent 4,500-acre upland farm on which he runs sheep, cattle and horses at all stages of their development.

He was clearly very proud of his farm, and rightly so. I think he derived almost as much pleasure from showing us around as I got from being shown round and he finished it off with a magnificent home-grown, barbecued, meal and an opportunity to compare the best that New Zealand can offer in terms of red wine with a couple of challengers from France. Heaven on Earth.

THERE are few who are associated with MJR now – perhaps only Steven Rabjohn, who has worked with us since those early days in Bank End, and Keith Watson, who is due to start back with us as a box driver for 2014 – and even fewer who are not associated with MJR who could imagine what our business was like at its outset.

I, believe it or not, took my turn at every imaginable role. I mucked out, I rode horses, I did the breaking, the feeding, and all the vet work. I drove the horsebox to the races on many occasions, saddled the horses, entertained the owners, and drove the box home.

We had some very good friends – Robin Murdy and Gordon Lonsdale spring to mind – who helped with building work and decoration, but Deirdre and I were not averse to lifting a shovel or a paint brush. I did all the office work myself and I probably found this harder than all other aspects of the job. I did the payroll, such as it was, the VAT return, all the entries and declarations – at three weeks, five days, and then 24 hours – and I wrote

every invoice by hand.

The invoicing was a particularly onerous task. We needed every penny we could gather but we wanted to appear to be cheap and to be offering good value for money. We followed what we believed to be the status quo and charged a daily training fee with a few 'extras' on top. The training fees were the first line of the invoice and the extras filled the rest of an A4 sheet.

As I did all the vet work myself, I didn't charge for my own services as a vet but I detailed every mil of drug and roll of bandage. It got quite ridiculous and I well remember that I used to charge for half a tube of Dermobion or part of a roll of Elastoplast.

I couldn't go on like that and I soon decided to include 'in-house' veterinary work in the daily training fee which, if nothing else, saved me a huge amount of time on writing invoices.

I cannot remember at what stage I decided that we should dispense with other

'extras' and include them in our daily rate but, as we were well established in Middleham before we could afford the luxury of a secretary, the incentive was always there to simplify the billing.

We steadily reduced the number of potential extras, with shoeing, vaccination, dentistry and other services added to those covered by our daily rate until we reached a stage where only surgery under general anaesthesia, gallop fees (paid through Weatherbys to the Middleham Trainers Association) and raceday expenses remained as additions to the daily rate.

I cannot remember exactly when it was, but I well remember the meeting where we decided that surgery under general anaesthetic should be included. I was well aware, and still am, that, for most owners, the first objective is to see their horse run and setbacks which result in the horse being sidelined are a big blow. There is no worse time to be sending your owner a

greatly inflated bill with no prospect of the horse running in the near future. I was certain that an all-in fee, with no extra to pay when the horse was injured or sidelined through illness, would soften the blow.

Of course, for those with large numbers of horses, what effectively amounts to an in-house insurance scheme is a lot less attractive but I am well aware that, in most yards, your horse doesn't need to be sick or injured to incur significant veterinary fees and other extras. I was certain that it would be advantageous to all our owners to bring as many things as possible under a fixed daily rate which would allow them to budget more accurately in advance.

This brought us to a position where the only training, as opposed to running, expense not included in our daily rate was gallop fees. I had never agreed with the principal of charging gallop fees as an extra and saw it as something akin to a

before we had our own facilities at Park Farm, I decided to take the plunge and include gallop fees in our inclusive daily rate.

To date, I have resisted the temptation to include raceday expenses as I feel this would be asking owners whose horses are not running to subsidise those whose horses are. I assume, rightly or wrongly, that once your horse is running you are happy to pay extra and that those whose horses are running at Catterick or Ripon might not take too kindly to contributing towards the expenses of runners at Ascot or Goodwood. Correct me if I am wrong.

AND so we reach the situation where we are today and our inclusive daily rate, which will rise to £68 per day in February includes everything except expenses, such as transport, which are directly related to your day at the races. It also comes with an undertaking to

restaurant charging a rental for the table. And so,

sponsor each horse to the tune of £75 per month which, I hope, puts a more realistic value on your branding sites than other large sponsorship deals on offer.

Many, unfortunately, still find the concept hard to grasp and don't fully understand that every veterinary fee, including surgery and investigative procedures that stretch to thousands of pounds, will be covered by your daily rate. Some still ask why, if their horse is not being ridden, it is not on the 'easy list' and on a reduced fee. They have to be reminded that the horse which is not fit to be ridden is invariably being visited by our vets and is undergoing investigative procedures and/or treatments. That, together with alternative exercise such as swimming, comes at no extra cost to the owner.

Thankfully, we are regularly reminded, by some of our owners who have horses in several stables, that our system does work and they tell us that we are invariably their cheapest trainer overall. I hope that remains the case and all I ask of you, with regard to our fees, is that you 'be fair when you compare'.

If we are getting it wrong, let us know.