



Don't pull punches in charities report

THE recent resignation, on health grounds, of the RSPCA's chief executive, Gavin Grant, may again focus some attention on what the charity does with its annual income which exceeds £110 million. Under his tenure the organisation came under heavy criticism for spending almost £330,000 on the prosecution of two members of the Heythrop Hunt, but the RSPCA still boast, in their annual report, of their success at 'headline grabbing' through such activity.

It is not, generally, the done thing to query the motives of those behind raising money for charity. When it is said of an individual that he or she 'does a lot for charity', this is invariably taken as a commendable thing and few even bother to ask for what charity, let alone why. But I have a propensity for kicking hornets' nests, so here I go again.

I was recently approached by a relatively new charity, Horses4homes, asking me, or Deirdre, to get involved. I had never heard of them and know nothing of what they do, but I found some of the literature that they sent me very interesting. In an effort to promote what they have achieved to date, they sought to compare themselves to some of the more established equine charities.

They claimed that, in 2012, Moorcroft Racehorse Welfare Centre re-homed 16 ex-racehorses and that their total annual expenditure during this period was £364,000; that the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre re-homed

33 horses, with a total spend of £465,000; that Greatwood Retired Racehorses re-homed seven, with an annual spend of £514,000; and that Heros (Homing Ex-Racehorses Organisation Scheme) re-homed 44 with an annual spend of £370,000.

They also claimed that each of these organisations received, at least, £85,000 from the racing charity, Retraining of Racehorses.

Proliferation

I cannot verify any of these figures and, no doubt, those organisations would tell us that they do far more than just re-homing horses but I did, a few years ago, have a look at the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre's accounts and I concluded, at that time, that it would be cheaper to keep horses in my yard, on full fees, than in the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre. I also queried how many horses really needed to be in these centres in the first place.

Thankfully, Retraining of Racehorses is currently conducting a review of all its activities which will include its financial support for other charitable organisations. Let's hope that that report won't be pulling any punches and that it will be willing to consider the motives behind the proliferation of equine charities and their focus on the racehorse -- the most pampered sector of the British equine population.

The very best of luck, Neil

IT HAS not been unusual in the past for former MJR vets to take up training – James Given, Andy Oliver, Anthony Cosgriff and James Tate all became trainers after leaving MJR – but now one of our in-house veterinary surgeons, Neil Mechie, has demonstrated his ability to train horses while still holding

down his full-time position as a vet.

Neil began training for the Point-To-Point field last year with a horse called Kildonnan and landed his first hunters' chase at Carlisle in March 2013. He then, together with Justin Landy, one of our farriers, acquired Ockey De Neulliac from Ferdy

Murphy and he has, again, managed to score 'between the flags' and under rules.

Winning the CGA Foxhunter Trial Walrus Open Hunters' Chase at Haydock on February 15 was clearly a tremendous thrill for Neil and Justin. Now Cheltenham beckons, and I wish them all the luck in the world.



Let's all get ready for the Tour de Middleham!

MOST of you should already know that the Tour de France is coming to Middleham but, no matter how much we shout about it, some people just can't get their heads round the idea that the real Tour de France will be in Yorkshire. Yes, it is the REAL Tour de France and it will pass directly in front of Kingsley House on the afternoon of Saturday July 5 this year. It is very exciting to think that the world's largest annual sporting event will pass right by our front gate and more than one million spectators will be coming to the Yorkshire Dales to watch the race begin.

Much of the credit for bringing this great event to Wensleydale must go to Gary Verity who once was our next-door neighbour here at Kingsley House and who now lives just up the road in Coverham. Not long before Gary set out on his Tour de France quest he told me of

an ambition to bring a £1 million horserace to Yorkshire.

He had in mind that the race would be run at York, that it might be based around the current Ebor Handicap, and that it could come, in time, to rival the Melbourne Cup. Many of those influential people within our industry whom he told of his dreams looked at him as if he had two heads, but that was nothing in comparison to the reaction he got from locals when, with no real support for his horseracing project, he turned his attention to the Tour de France.

We missed the boat there. A man with great ideas and the determination to make things happen was not welcomed into the racing fold. Now, I am certain, he would get a very different reaction.

Let's hope, when the Tour de France is over, that Gary Verity will again think of horseracing when he is looking for a new dream.

So just what are these all-weather 'experts' basing their opinions on?

I AM a little bit disappointed that my piece in last month's Klarion on All-Weather surfaces and their lack of elasticity failed to provoke more reaction. Especially as the debate on the condition of the Wolverhampton surface continues to rage, with some trainers clearly convinced that there is an increased risk attached to running at that track.

I am far from convinced that that is the case and, having been assured that recorded injury rates have not increased at the track, I am happy to continue to race horses there. I am, however, convinced that the surface is far from ideal and I am concerned that we have yet again seen that there is no consensus on what does constitute an ideal synthetic surface and no objective evidence on what properties and parameters we should be seeking.

I have heard references to 'consultants' reports but I am at a loss to know what qualities, knowledge or experience is required to call oneself a 'consultant' on all-weather surfaces for horseracing. Have there actually been any proper scientific trials? I very much doubt it. Are we relying on pseudo-science as I suggested last month? I fear we are.

I cannot claim to have all the answers and I, too, am relying, in the absence of science, on anecdotal evidence. But having trained for 25 years on synthetic surfaces and for two years before that on natural (beach) sand, and having had, I suspect, more runners and more winners on synthetic surfaces than any other trainer in the world, I have a bundle of anecdotal evidence and more than a modicum of experience.

Yet, it seems, that my beliefs on how a synthetic surface should perform are at odds with those of the 'experts' and 'consultants'. I'd love to hear what they are basing their opinions on.



FLAT jockeys are lucky, compared to most sportsmen and women, as many can remain at the top of their profession into their fifties. It is still, however, a relatively short career when compared with the rest of us and, for most, there is at least an element of uncertainty as to whether they have the necessary skills to turn their hand to a new career.

Many top jockeys do turn to training and I think it is fair to say that, when compared to those who rode over jumps, flat jockeys don't have a great record.

Johnny Murtagh (above), however, I am delighted to say, is managing to retire from the saddle at the top, aged 43, despite years of struggling with his weight, and he has already proved, since taking out a licence to train in May last year, that he is a very competent trainer.

Johnny was never a regular jockey for us but, despite this, he managed to partner three of my Group 1 winners from a relatively small number of rides. He won the Irish St. Leger for us on Jukebox Jury in 2011, but it was when partnered with Royal Rebel that we really saw his ability to get the best out of a horse when winning the Ascot Gold Cup in 2001 and again the following year.

Royal Rebel is surely one of our most underrated horses and, perhaps, one of the most underrated stayers of recent years. It takes a very good horse to win any race at Royal Ascot, an exceptional horse to win a Group 1 race at Royal Ascot and, even if Yeats made it look easy, a pretty unique horse to win successive Group 1s at the Royal meeting.

Royal Rebel was a unique horse and was, to my mind, neither built nor bred to stay marathon trips. He was also a very lazy horse – there is no getting away from it – and that, when combined with his heavy build, made him a very unlikely winner of the Ascot Gold Cup. But, thankfully for us, Johnny Murtagh is built and bred to be a stayer and he is not lazy.

He was willing to work every yard of the race to get the best out of that horse and he did. Twice.