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The things that really matter

THIS time last month my sister, Lyn, died. This morning (June 1), as I sat down to prepare this piece, William Haggas called to tell me that our friend and colleague, John Hills, had succumbed to the cancer which was diagnosed only a few months ago.

John's death was not a complete shock as I knew how ill he was but, only yesterday, I was with his brothers Richard and Michael and they were enthusiastically telling me that he was doing well and hoped to get out of hospital tomorrow. Michael showed me a picture he had taken of John just a few days ago and I decided then that I must visit him. I never got the chance.

While his family will to some extent have been prepared for the worst, this must still come as a horrendous shock to Fiona and their four daughters. I don't know the girls well but have very fond memories of spending some time with them when they were quite small and we found ourselves staying in the same hotel when holidaying in Dubai.

With John training in Lambourn and us in Yorkshire, we only really met through work but, as we shared strong views on racing politics and a liking for nice red wine, we often gravitated together at sales and races. I had many a good chat with him over a few glasses and considered him a friend. I'll miss him.

The racing world was also shocked when Jimmy Fortune's wife died suddenly in the middle of last month. I didn't know Jan at all but can imagine how devastating this must be for Jimmy and his two young sons.

As they say, 'life goes on' and I may fall back into the habit of taking it for granted and of placing too much importance on things that shouldn't really matter. I hope I don't, and that I can retain some of my new-found perspective on life. Those of us involved professionally in horseracing and, in particular, those, like me, who are fiercely competitive, can be very guilty of over-emphasising the importance of what we do.

So, the next time I am down in the dumps because the horses are running badly, or a particular favourite has just been beaten out of sight, or even when a horse has been injured and its career is over, don't hesitate to remind me, as Ruby Walsh did earlier this year and was so wrongly castigated for his words, that nobody died.

RICHARD HUGHES did us all a favour by resurrecting the debate on watering of tracks.

He reiterated most of what I have been saying for years, but he managed to provoke a response from the BHA who produced figures to substantiate their claim that horses are at greater risk of injury on firm ground.

Those figures shouldn't be ignored and the very fact that they are gathering such data is to be welcomed, but I am sure that those collecting the data would be the first to admit that the information they receive is, at best, incomplete. The figures on the numbers of fatalities that occur on a racecourse are, of course, accurate but it is arguably too simplistic to just assume that all the horses had an equal risk of fracture going into the race.

If, for example, the 5,105 horses out of 194,743 (BHA figures for 2008-2012) that ran on firm ground are, on average, of a lower grade than those

Weakening by watering

running on good ground, and we know that injury rates are higher in low-grade horses, then we know that they had a higher risk of fracture going into the race.

I think that is quite likely to be the case and I also think that, if we delved a bit deeper, we would find that certain tracks, such as Bath, might account for a disproportionate number of the runners on firm ground and it is unreasonable to compare the fatality rate on firm ground at Bath with the fatality rate on good ground at, for example, Pontefract.

For an accurate picture of the effect of going on injury rates we must compare like with like, Bath with Bath, and York with York, especially when you consider that the going descriptions are subjective, open to interpretation, and entrusted to those who, with the best

will in the world, have a vested interest in attracting runners. Once you start to separate out the figures for different tracks I suspect that, in many cases, the numbers and the difference between injury rates on different going are likely to become too small to be statistically significant.

The figures on long-term injuries are even more difficult to interpret as most of these go unreported when they are detected after leaving the track and, in addition, the very fact that they are categorised as 'long-term' means that it is difficult to be sure whether the damage was done in one run.

Furthermore, these figures make no distinction between watered ground and that which is left to nature, and Richard Hughes and I think they are very different things. There is no requirement for courses to tell us whether they are watering or not and the information from tracks is variable at best.

I still agree with Richard that the obsession with watering, driven by the change

in the rules to instruct courses to aim for good-firm ground rather than water to grow grass and leave the state of the going on the day to nature, is ruining many of our tracks. I also feel that racing is poorer for the lack of races run on a sound, fast surface and that, even if the BHA's figures could be statistically proven then, by watering, we would ultimately be tending towards a weaker breed of horse, less capable of running on a firm surface.

Let's face it, injury rate, especially the risk of fractures and fatal injuries, increases with speed. It is probably reasonable to assume that, as horses go faster on firmer ground, the injury rate will increase although, once again, there are other factors to be considered such as increased fatigue in soft ground.

But, in any event, we shouldn't be looking to reduce the injury rate by slowing the horses down. All that will do is to create a spiral of declining ability and strength in the breed.



Richard Hughes

TONY BARLOW (see page 9, Kingsley Kickback) is delighted to see that the BHA is going to get tough with trainers who abuse the system of self-certification under which they can withdraw horses after being declared to run.

It is hard to argue with the premise that the authority should get tough with those who are abusing a system or breaking rules, and at least Mr Barlow has noted that the rise in non-runners was entirely down to the introduction of 48-hour declarations, but I think there are serious risks attached to any system which seeks to pressurise owners or trainers into running horses which they would rather not run.

For me, the most telling fact to emerge from the BHA's notification of their intention to act on this matter was that the number of non-runners per race has not risen since 2009 when the introduction of 48-hour declarations caused a sharp rise and put the number of non-runners in flat races well above

Beware the dangers of a tougher line on self-certs

that for jump racing. So it would seem that, since the self-certification system was introduced, the number of non-runners per race has remained constant and if there is any abuse of the system it hasn't changed in over four years.

However, field sizes are declining and the BHA has stated quite clearly that they are taking this action because non-runners impact on field sizes. But the decline in field sizes cannot be attributed to an increase in non-runners – that figure hasn't changed – and must be down to other factors: presumably prize-money, rising costs, a significant increase in the number of races, and a declining horse population. So we are going to try and halt, or reduce, the decline in field sizes by

making it more difficult to withdraw horses after declaration. Surely we need, first, to consider why, if we believe that some of these horses are fit to run, they are being withdrawn and try to address the issues that make connections prefer not to run. After all, the owner isn't paying upwards of £25,000 per annum to watch it on the gallops. If they don't want to run, they must have a pretty good reason.

It is often stated, quite rightly, that the main reason for the introduction of the self-certification system was to reduce financial impact on trainers from the inevitable rise in non-runners that came with 48-hour declarations but it is rarely considered that the old system, whereby these horses required a veterinary certi-

cate, was unsustainable. Veterinary surgeons were commonly writing certificates to say that horses had 'not eaten up' or had 'coughed at exercise' when it was clearly impossible for them to verify this fact. I cannot see the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons allowing us to return to such a system and so, if we remove a trainer's right to self-certify, we are putting severe pressure on that trainer to run horses against his better judgement and that will compromise the welfare of some horses.

It should also be noted that, while Mr Barlow found it 'particularly sweet' to see Mukhmal win at Chester when drawn 10 of 10 and so did I, I didn't want to run. When I saw Mukhmal's draw, I called Angus Gold and suggested that the horse be withdrawn but he said that it was Sheikh Hamdan's policy that we could not withdraw horses because of their draw. Personally, I'm not sure if we should be staging races where some participants, due to their draw, have little or no chance.

IN the last month I have been lucky enough to sample some of the best catering for owners and trainers on British race-tracks.

Many tracks have upped their game, including Newmarket and Haydock, but most still have a long way to go to reach the standard set by Ascot, Chester and Ayr.

Ayr was the first to introduce a full, sit-down meal for owners and they sometimes don't get the credit they deserve for this.

Chester stole the limelight with their owners' dining room and they continue to offer first-rate hospitality but, for me, Ascot is the best and they have upped their game even more this year by including wine (Ayr always have included wine).

Unfortunately, on my only visit this season, I was unable to partake as I was flying home.

They did, however, very generously entertain a number of northern trainers at Middlethorpe Hall a couple of weeks ago and I'm sure I made up for anything I missed out on at the track.

Thank-you for the support

Deirdre and I would like to thank everyone for their thoughts and sympathies after the death of my sister, Lyn. The dozens of cards, letters, messages and emails have given us support and comfort during a difficult time.

Lyn would have been overwhelmed, and especially by the huge turnout for her funeral. We would also like to thank our staff who have rallied round to support us and make sure that everything continued to run as normal. Kingsley Park looks as wonderful as ever and this is down to Lyn's great management. Her organisation continues, and that is a fitting legacy.