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Gearing up for the Tour de France (and Dales!)

WE HAVE known for around two years that the Tour de France will be coming to Middleham on Saturday July 5, but it is only quite recently that it started getting through to people from outside the area that we are talking about the real Tour de France and that it is coming right through Middleham on the road that separates our Kingsley and Warwick House yards.

The Tour de France is the biggest annual sporting event in the world and it is estimated that somewhere in the region of 1,000,000 people will visit the Dales for the race. Goodness knows how many have already visited, especially on bikes, during the last few months as we build towards the race and I am sure the event will result in increased visitor numbers for years to come.

I am not new to cycling, although I am sure you can tell from my shape that I am not the type of cyclist who enters the Tour de France. The cycling trips that I do go on tend to be rather sporadic as it is difficult to fit any hobby into the busy racing season and our weather rarely lends itself to cycling in the winter. Despite this, I, like thousands of other cyclists, have caught a touch of

Tour de France fever and I set out last Sunday, with my friend Simon Stirk, to tackle the 120 miles of the first stage, which begins in Leeds and ends in Harrogate.

It was a gruelling ride and it took us just under 10 hours at an average speed of just over 12 mph, less than half the speed that the professionals will average. I believe they refer to it as a 'flat stage' which is very hard to believe as it incorporates the famous Buttertubs 17% climb from Wensleydale into Swaledale and that is followed just 10 miles later by the return over Grinton Moor.

I had cycled Buttertubs once before, just to make sure I could do it, but not after having already covered 60 miles. It was a killer and, to cap it all, my bike started to give some trouble just as I reached the steepest part. I managed to stay on and complete the climb but the idea of having to do anything similar to get back into Wensleydale was beyond contemplation. Thankfully, however, a short rest at the Dales Bike Centre in Reeth, where their mechanic did a temporary repair on my bike, saw us refreshed and ready for almost anything. Grinton Moor wasn't half as bad as we had expected and, by the time we passed Kingsley House, the end was in sight with just 30, relatively



Mark and Simon stop at Kingsley House with 30 miles to go

easy, miles to go.

It was new territory for us both as we have never exceeded 100 miles in a day before, but I am glad I have done it. It will certainly add a huge amount to my interest when watching the race.

THERE IS no doubt whatsoever that Australia is a really magnificent horse and a worthy winner of two Derbies, but the concerns expressed by the Aga Khan's manager, Georges Rimaud, about the recent and very rapid decline of the Irish Derby are nonetheless valid.

He shares the blame for this between all of Europe's racing authorities, with particular emphasis on changes that were made to the French programme and he may well be right.

However, his words prompted me to have a look at the entry fees for the race as I have long complained that the entry systems for our top races are geared to getting as much money

as possible from owners at the expense of what I would see as the more important objective -- getting the best horses into the race. I always believed that the Irish were even worse, but a comparison of the Irish and Epsom Derbies didn't really confirm this.

The Epsom Derby closes more than 18 months in advance, when the horses are still yearlings, at a cost of £500. The Irish equivalent closes nearly a year later on November 6 and, although nearly four times the price at £2,000, many contenders will have shown ability in Pattern class by that time. The total cost of running at Epsom, if entered as a yearling, is £7,000 (which includes

subsequent forfeit stage fees), whereas the total cost of running in the Irish Derby is £12,500.

A second entry stage is available for both races at £8,000 (£20,500 total to run) on April 8 for Epsom, and at £12,500 (£16,000 total to run) on May 21 for the Curragh. And both races can be entered with just five days to go for £75,000 (Epsom) or £100,000 (Curragh).

Both races are expensive to enter and, in both cases, the timings of entry and forfeit stages are planned to limit the information available to connections. It is no coincidence that the forfeit stages tend to come before the major Derby trials. However, the first entry for the Irish Derby is not

until the end of the two-year-old season and the second entry stage, at £16,000 to run, seems almost reasonable when compared to Epsom. So it is unlikely that the entry system is the principal barrier to success of this race.

However, a closer look at the entries reveals that one trainer, Aidan O'Brien, had 53 of the 406 entries at the first stage in the Epsom Derby and a whopping 41%, (36) of the 87 horses entered in the Irish Derby at the first stage. He won both races and filled the first three places in the Irish Derby, so the system clearly works for him but it is not a policy that could be advocated by many, if any, other trainers.

IN LAST month's Klarion, when writing about watered ground and injury rates, I stated that 'we know injury rates are higher in low-grade horses'. Our editor immediately queried this statement and asked for a further explanation, but I said there wasn't space for a full explanation and I was willing to stand by what I had said.

However, one regular Klarion reader, Paul Moulton, has also queried what I said (see Kickback. P.9)) and makes a very good point when he says: 'I'd always believed that the better horses carried greater injury risks relative to their weaker same-age contemporaries, because they push themselves harder and run faster'.

I think he is right and a 3yo having the fourth run of its life in the Guineas will be at greater risk of injury than a 3yo having its fourth race in a low-grade handicap for exactly the reasons that Paul gives. But there are other factors affecting the risk including age, number of starts to date, frequency of starts, conformation, previous injury history and, of course, the condition and topography of the track. Overall, therefore, those lower-grade horses ultimately have higher injury rates and, of course, there are far more low-grade horses running and low-grade races run, so the overall injury rates given by the BHA will be dominated by this group.

Paul's comment also reminds me of the old racing anecdote which is often used when a horse gets loose and gallops home. It is often said that 'it never happens to the bad ones' and so, if a horse arrives home unscathed, people will say 'it can't be any good then'. I'm certain there is logic behind this as, as Paul so rightly says, the good ones run faster and put themselves at greater risk.

One thing we can't measure in a horse, or any animal, is its pain barriers and I imagine that better athletes have higher pain thresholds and probably get a strong hormonal 'high' from running or even from pain itself.

I'm all for zero tolerance, but . . .

THE NEW BHA 'zero tolerance' policy on anabolic steroids is certainly to be welcomed and it seems likely that, with the cooperation of most major racing nations, we will be moving much closer to a level playing field for all international racing outside the USA.

I think it is reasonable for me to claim that I was one of the first to draw attention to this issue, and I might add that I didn't get much thanks for it at the time, but I am rather perturbed by the reaction of some of those who have jumped on the bandwagon and are now claiming that the legislation doesn't go far enough and that lifetime bans should be handed out like parking tickets.

When I first pointed out that the widespread use of anabolic steroids in other jurisdictions, whether in or out of training and regardless of whether the drugs were detectable on raceday, was potentially leaving British horses at a disadvantage in international races, it was assumed by many that these drugs had a relatively short period of action.

Members of the veterinary profession, with much greater knowledge of pharmacology than I ever had, were among those who sought to discredit my views on the subject only six years ago. And I make no apology for reminding everyone that Australian trainer Peter Moody said that "if someone like Mark Johnston wants to train like they did 200 years ago, then good luck to him. You've got to look at every advantage within the rules of racing to get to the high-

est level. Obviously he doesn't have a vet in his yard."

And when it was pointed out to him that I was a vet, he said, "Maybe he is not a very competent one."

Now the new legislation is based around the premise that the drugs have a very long period of action indeed and some are saying that a 14-month ban for a horse is not enough. They are also calling for lifetime bans for anyone found guilty of administering anabolic steroids and most, it seems, are assuming that such a person will be a licensed trainer. This is, to some extent understandable as the most recent high-profile cases have involved trainers but they seem to be overlooking the fact that detection and, ultimately, prosecutions will soon rely on hair testing which, it is claimed, will be able to confirm that a horse was given a certain drug many months ago.

It should be remembered that most anabolic steroid use is likely to have been before horses ever enter training and in some countries where use was common in raced horses the drug was often administered during a spell out of training. This is why the new rules will make horses subject to random testing anywhere, anytime, from the date of first registration but it will not be easy to determine who administered the drug, and that person might not be licensed by the BHA. That the trainer or owner at the time when the horse is tested should face a lifetime ban for an action they may not have had any part in or knowledge of, is surely ridiculous.