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RODEO'S REAL RIDING HEROES

THOSE OF you who read my 'Bletherings' at www.markjohnstonracing.com will know that Deirdre and I attended the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas for the second time last month. It could well become an annual trip for us.

I know very little about rodeo but thoroughly enjoy watching it. I am hugely impressed by the riding skills of the competitors and the many ancillary workers such as the outriders who 'rescue' those bronc riders who aren't catapulted from their mounts. I'd be interested to know

how much the sport has changed over the years. I suspect very little. It is easy to imagine each discipline evolving to test the skills that were, and still are, used when herding and tending cattle on horseback.

Having said that, I cannot think of any practical application for bull-riding. That is surely only a test of bravery but it is, nonetheless, very exciting and impressive to watch. I still find it hard to imagine that the bull riders come back, night after night, to do it again when they often appear to have taken a pounding that would put many a work rider out for months. The safety precautions seem minimal, with many bull riders and all bronc riders, still favouring a Stetson over a helmet.

There is a 'sports medicine team' who are continually praised by the commentators but they are

unrecognisable as medics when compared with those that we see on British racecourses or even football fields. For a start, they dress like almost everyone else there in jeans, boots, and the obligatory ten-gallon hats.

There isn't a 'magic sponge' in sight, never mind a stretcher, and one bareback bronc rider, who was later reported to have suffered a compression fracture of a thoracic vertebra, was simply helped from the arena between two of the medical team members.

I can't imagine what the Health and Safety Executive would have to say about it in this country and I am certainly not saying that it is right but, in a world that is increasingly bogged down with bureaucracy, there is something very refreshing about their attitude.

Pride and - trepidation?

READING John Scanlon's review of 2014 gave me a great sense of pride in what our team has achieved this year but, at the same time, raised a significant feeling of trepidation about the year to come and the task that lies ahead of us.

John refers to 'a record of consistent winner-finding unparalleled in the annals of the British turf' and that is, no doubt, the thing that gives me most pride. I have always been quick to accept that prize-money won is a better measure of a trainer's success than the blunt number of winners and I am also very conscious of the importance of quality over quantity as measured by the number of Pattern race wins and places.

But, let's face it, for virtually all owners, the first rung of the ladder with each and every horse involves winning a race. And for me as a trainer, the first target with every individual is to get its head in front. Once that is in the bag, we can start to think about climbing the ladder and heading for the top.

The percentage of individual winners

from horses run is also vitally important to me as it is a measure of our ability to 'deliver the goods' for owners who choose to send us a horse. And, therefore, it was another source of pride in 2014 that we should finish top of the tree with 55% individual winners to runners.

But 2014 is over, it is back to scratch, and we must now start looking for winners in this New Year. It won't be easy to maintain that consistency. It has been well publicised that there have been very significant changes to the make-up of our team and that cannot help but have an impact on the number of winners.

In 2014, 68 individual two-year-olds won us 43 races, while 143 three-year-olds or older won 164 races. So, the 2yos accounted for 32% of the individual runners and won 21% of our races. The 3yos+ accounted for 68% of the individual runners and 79% of the winners.

I expect that, for 2015, the make-up of the string will be reversed with two-thirds being 2yos. If they operate at the same strike rates as in 2014, then I estimate that we will be looking at a target of 156 winners. That

would be our lowest in 10 years but still looks a daunting task when you consider that, last year, we had won 46 races by the end of March. This year our AW team will be tiny by comparison. Hence my trepidation.

HOWEVER, this all sounds rather negative and I have no intention of approaching this season with a negative attitude, especially as we have such a wonderful team of 2yos to look forward to. The Richard Hannons and, in the past, Jack Berry, have shown us that records can be broken by yards which are dominated by 2yos, although their teams were almost certainly more geared towards early types. Furthermore, even Richard Hannon Jnr had to rely on older horses for 42% of his winners in 2014. But, with such a large number of 2yos, there must be sharp, early, ones among them and it is for us to find them. A glance at our juveniles on the canter this week would suggest that the quick ones will be revealing themselves by March.

Medication rules - the upside and the 'Doonside'!

ICAN'T deny that I was delighted to hear that Sennockian Star had been awarded the Doonside Cup. It's not every day that you win a Listed race and he is such a tough, genuine, horse that it is easy to feel that he deserved the accolade of big 'black type' which had, so far, eluded him despite his 106 BHA rating. It was also particularly good news for owners Colin Norton and Alan Burke who received more than £20,000 in additional prize-money.

I do, however, have a great deal of sympathy for Saeed bin Suroor and the connections of Sky Hunter. He was a clear-cut winner of the race and was disqualified after he tested positive for the anti-ulcer treatment, Omeprazole.

There is no suggestion that this drug has any performance-enhancing effect and I have no doubt that it was being given with the best of intentions and in the belief that they were operating within the rules. The drug was, apparently, with-

drawn five days before the race and the BHA publish a detection time for Omeprazole of 72 hours.

However, as the BHA say on their website, 'Detection Times are not synonymous with Withdrawal Times. To decide a Withdrawal Time an adequate safety margin must be added to the stated Detection Time by the treating veterinary surgeon using their professional judgement and discretion, to allow for biological, pharmaceutical and pharmacological variation, to minimise the possibility of a positive finding occurring on race day.'

Furthermore, the detection time published by the BHA for Omeprazole is based on the use of the product Gastrogard at a particular dosage and the source of Omeprazole in this case was, apparently, a different product at a higher dosage.

In this case the treating veterinary surgeon has used a withdrawal time which equated to a 66% increase on the BHA's published detection time but it has been assumed that, due to a different dosage, that was not enough. That may be the case but, to my mind, it is also possible that the BHA detection time is misleading, inaccurate and based on insufficient information.

Disqualification

There has been at least one other Omeprazole positive that resulted in disqualification of the horse and fining of the trainer, where the source of Omeprazole could not be identified at all. And there are countless findings of other drugs well outside the published detection times which are explained away as being down

to accidental contamination or inaccurate record-keeping.

In all cases of positive tests for prohibited substances, whether or not any advantage was gained and regardless of whether it can be established that the trainer allowed the substance to be given to the horse, disqualification is automatic and the fines are substantial. Where truly performance-enhancing drugs are involved the trainer's livelihood is at stake and it is claimed that, with the introduction of hair-testing, some detection times will be stretched to many months.

I fear that, no matter how hard a trainer or veterinary surgeon tries to adhere to the rules and to use his or her 'professional judgement and discretion to minimise the possibility of a positive finding occurring on raceday', there is still a chance of falling foul of these rules. I have never

been comfortable about the accuracy of the detection times published by the BHA and, as a result, we add very large margins for error.

Despite this, we had a positive test in 2013 for the drug Mepivacaine many months after it had been used on the horse. The published detection time for Mepivacaine is, like Omeprazole, 72 hours. To this day, I am unable to explain how that horse could test positive for Mepivacaine and, despite tightening of all procedures and independent auditing of those procedures, I cannot say that I have changed anything to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

I always used to feel that British racing's zero-tolerance approach to drug use was the simplest and best system, but if it results in hefty financial penalties being levied on individuals who have neither gained any advantage nor sought to gain any advantage, then surely we must think again.

A step in the Wright direction?

***MORE AND MORE** people are accepting the folly of proposals to have jockey and trainer championships which end on Champions Day and, in Owner and Breeder magazine, Howard Wright describes that proposal as 'plain daft'.*

He advocates a jockeys' championship that runs for a calendar year, ending on the final day of the defined Flat season, just as the trainers' championship does now.

I supported that system when it was brought in as I find it preferable to the idea of split seasons but I still think it is unnecessarily complicated and, particularly unsuited to flat racing in which horses have their official birthday on January 1. Surely, we should return to the trainers' previous system and have a championship which runs from January 1 to December 31.

Above all, if we are going to make championships meaningful by throwing significant amounts of prize-money at them, it is imperative that we structure them to drive the behaviour that we want. The championships should encourage owners, trainers and jockeys to race in Britain as much as possible rather than openly encourage them to ply their trade or run their horses abroad for half the year.

WHAT IF...

With the BHA extending their system for re-opening races at declaration stage to cover all races with fewer than eight declared runners (previously only handicaps) and introducing a system to void some races with fewer than four declared runners, I wonder if some bright spark will decide that we may as well revert to 24-hour declarations.