



mark@markjohnstonracing.com

Is appetite for all-weather a healthy one?

GREAT LEIGHS, now known as Chelmsford City, has re-opened to general, if not unanimous, acclaim. Most reports have been very positive but, later in this issue, journalist Rolf Johnson suggests that little has changed.

Unfortunately, due to our greatly depleted all-weather string this year, I haven't yet been there to judge for myself but I'm delighted to see that prize-money levels appear to be greater than on offer for comparable races at the other AW tracks. Let's hope that translates into better field sizes and more competitive races, and results in some competition for runners.

Former trainer Neil Graham now works for Chelmsford City and he phoned me a couple of months ago to ask why I was against the development. I have no idea as to where he got that impression. He clearly hadn't noticed that I had more runners at Great Leighs than any other trainer in Britain although, like most others, I was very unimpressed with the facilities at the time and with the idea that it might be acceptable to have a racecourse where it isn't possible to watch the whole race live. I am deeply disappointed to hear that that is still the case and I dearly hope that they rectify that situation as soon as possible.

Ridiculous

We now know that both Catterick and Newcastle are hoping to build all-weather tracks within the next year and we know that there is great demand for an all-weather track in the north. The current distribution of all-weather tracks is ridiculous with three of the five in the far south-east and none in the north. There is little doubt that an all-weather in the north-east of England would result in a larger population of horses remaining in training for the winter months, but it is still highly unlikely that we have either the appetite or the available horses to service a further overall increase in all-weather fixtures.

If Catterick and/or Newcastle get anything like the number of fixtures they say they require for a viable enterprise, who is going to give up all-weather fixtures in order for the current balance to be maintained? It is possible that ARC would close Southwell but I have no doubt that they will still be seeking to increase their number of money-spinning, low-grade, all-weather races. I, for one, am totally against that and I am also totally against digging up one of the best turf tracks in Britain to replace it with an all-weather.

Search for small-field solution continues

THE BHA's small-field abandonment trial continues and continues to create controversy.

Due to the small number of entries we are having at present, I haven't felt any effect from this initiative and cannot, therefore, properly judge how it is working but I fully understand the principles behind it and agree that it is desirable to cut the number of small-field, low-grade races on the all-weather. They are uncompetitive, uninteresting and of little value to anyone other than the racecourse, which still makes a clear profit on the race, and the participants.

Steve Dennis, in the Racing Post, claimed that, if races are to be culled on the basis of field size, the policy should be applied equally to all races and that Grade 1 races with four runners or less should be treated the same as Sellers or Claimers. Utter nonsense.

He suggests that 'the simple fact of a race attracting only four runners means not enough people care about it for it to be viable, whether it be the Chester Vase, the Sussex Stakes, the 32Red Fillies' Handicap or the Tolworth Hurdle'.

Get real. Not viable? The two four-runner Sussex Stakes won by Frankel?

The Juddmonte International in 2009, which attracted just four runners from two stables and in which Sea The Stars beat Mastercraftsman? Not viable? Tell that to all those who turned up at Goodwood or York on those days for no other reason than to see those great horses run.

The reasons why only a handful of horses turn up to take on Frankel or Sea The Stars, despite the prize-money on offer, are many and sometimes complicated. They include the fact that, in many cases, the entry system is structured to extract the maximum from owners in entry fees rather than to attract the largest number of the best horses available on the day.

Unlike the small-field handicap at Southwell, you don't get another chance to enter when you see that you are only going to have four opponents. In any case, at that level, in any sport, there are very few serious contenders.

Radical

The reason why there are small fields in sellers, claimers, classified stakes and low-grade handicaps on the all-weather is because there are too many available races and not



Sea The Stars beats Mastercraftsman and two others at York

enough horses to run in them. It is time for us to accept that we either need to cut the number of races or make radical changes to the funding of racing in order to attract more owners and make it viable for them to have more horses in training.

That said, I do not necessarily agree with the way these races are being culled at short notice. That policy is going to do nothing at all for the underlying problem and it is unfair on the small number of individuals involved. Frankly, the whole system of re-opening races when they fail to attract enough entries or declarations is

unfair and often encourages trainers, including myself, to hold back and allow, or even cause, the race to re-open so that we can have a better idea of the opposition. It costs us no more to enter or declare when the race re-opens.

Surely, we should have to pay some additional fee to go into races after the normal closing time as would be the case for supplementary entries in early closing races? There should be some advantage to entering and/or declaring at the first stage. Currently, there is a clear advantage to those that enter or declare when re-opened.

COBALT BLUES

It was great to hear from our old friend, from the Land of Oz, John Stretton (see Kickback, p. 6). John was acting racing manager for Wayne Heathcote, part owner of Quick Ransom when we took the horse for the 1994 Melbourne Cup.

I had a great time with John and well remember him introducing us to rodeo in Melbourne.

In his letter John refers to the current furore in Australian racing over positive tests for cobalt beyond the new limit of 200 micrograms per litre of urine. He says that has been around to improve performance in the world of harness racing for most of the last decade but, as I understand it, there is no firm evidence that it has a positive effect on performance in horses. Even in humans, there is uncertainty about the benefits of cobalt use and no doubts whatsoever that it has serious detrimental side-effects if taken in excess.

Cobalt is known to stimulate erythropoiesis (production of red cells) but, even if we can boost red cell production in horses, there is no evidence that this will result in enhanced performance. The fit racehorse has a massive reserve of red cells in its spleen and it is unlikely that red cell volume is ever a limiting factor on performance of a fit healthy racehorse.

STICKING TO OUR GUNS

IT seems that my liking for straight – some might say 'blunt' – talking and calling a spade a shovel has rubbed off on son Charlie. He didn't mince his words in Spotlight last month when he stated that 'the ground at Thirsk has been bad for a number of seasons' and, as you can imagine, that didn't go down too well with the Clerk of the Course, James Sanderson. You can see James' letter in Kickback (p. 6) and Charlie's reply.

I sympathise with James Sanderson who, like all clerks of courses, is in

the unenviable position of having to try to please everyone. That is an impossible task so, in most instances, clerks aim to please the majority or, at least, avoid displeasing them enough to result in the withdrawal of horses. They know that the word 'firm' in the going description will reduce the number of runners and, if they take BHA instructions literally and aim for Good-Firm ground, there is a risk of it drying out to Firm which can be catastrophic for the number of runners. Many, therefore, water to alle-

viate that risk and the result can be, as Charlie suggests, that the ground is always softer than described.

THE majority are not always right and I have no problem with holding a minority view and sticking to it. I understand why James Sanderson and many like him will stick to their guns and cater for the majority of trainers but Charlie was saying it as he sees it and, frankly, I see it the same way. On June 15 last year I wrote in my 'Bletherings' column on our website (see

www.markjohnstonracing.com) that: "We are also declaring today for Thirsk where the going is described as 'Good-Firm Watering'. It is invariably overwatered there and invariably too soft on the home bend. It is less than 20 miles from here and, looking out my window, there is no shortage of water in the sky. Our ground on the gallops is soft and, if I had a watering system, I would have had no call to use it this year; even if my aim was just to grow grass".

I will make the effort to go to Thirsk more often in the coming season and

walk the track. Maybe things have improved since James Sanderson took over in 2011. Prior to that, when Christopher Tetley was in charge, I resorted to walking the track with a camera to photograph the divots and the depth that my stick would penetrate. Mr. Tetley had claimed that he could see from the stands that I was deliberately inserting my stick into holes made by the vertidrain in order to suggest that the ground was softer than described, but neither he nor any of the stewards would come out and look at it with me.