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Anything to declare?

THERE is, to my mind, an unhealthy obsession with 'inside information' among followers of our sport and I have little doubt that the trend is fuelled and furthered by a similar obsession among leaders and regulators in the industry. Of course, the sport of horseracing has always been surrounded by a certain mystique and, for some, that is a major attraction. There are many regular punters who are continually seeking an edge but for whom the idea of painstakingly and objectively studying form is like a request to learn a foreign language.

They believe that their route to riches is through listening to rumour, relying on pundits and tipsters, or 'following the money'. The industry does little or nothing to dissuade them from their beliefs and, if anything, encourages the idea that trainers and jockeys are privy to information which gives a fairly accurate guide to the likely result.

Information

In his column this month vet John Martin seeks to explain the various 'wind' operations performed on horses, prompted to do so by an article in the Racing Post which discussed whether these procedures should be added to the growing list of information which is deemed to be publicly declarable information in the racecard.

The Racing Post article, by Jon Lees, does try to offer an impartial assessment of whether or not this information should be made available to punters but, despite giving over a double-page spread to the subject, fails to establish whether or not the information is of any value. Jon does touch on the fact that, for every high-profile example of a horse which is believed to have improved for having had surgery, there are numerous examples of those that have not improved but there are still, clearly, a lot of people, including trainers, owners, punters and officials, who believe that the improvement in some horses is as a direct result of 'wind' surgery. Interestingly, however, the vets who are performing the surgery are all rather hesitant when it comes to making concrete claims on efficacy.

It is alarming, to say the least, to think just what percentage of horses running over jumps have had surgery of this kind and how many have had it more than once in their career. Like the use of Lasix in the USA, when we reach a stage where the vast majority of the field are on the drug or have had the procedure, it becomes almost impossible to know how they might have performed without it.

It is suggested that the BHA see the plethora of possible procedures and doubts about the effect as being the main stumbling block to making declaration of wind ops mandatory, but I well remember

from my time on the BHA that the then veterinary director, Tim Morris, pointed out that their inability to police such a rule was an even bigger obstacle. How can you make it mandatory to declare that a horse has had a surgical procedure when you cannot verify whether it has been done or not? Even with endoscopy it is not always possible to tell what procedures, if any, have been carried out.

Displacement

As things stand, we are able to use some equipment to aid breathing but some aids are banned. In addition, we must declare certain tack but other items can be used without declaration. We can use a tongue-tie but we must declare it. We can use a special bit in the horse's mouth with the intention of holding the tongue in place, as with a tongue-tie, and we have no need to declare this. We can use various forms of noseband to hold the mouth shut, in the belief that this helps prevent displacement of the soft palate and there is no need to declare those. We cannot use sticking plasters to hold the nostrils open, whether we declare them or not, and we cannot use a collar to hold the larynx in the desired position. We can do various forms of surgery and there is no need to declare any of them. Confused? Hardly surprising, but I doubt if it has any effect whatsoever on your chance of picking winners.

Other information is passed to punters, under the rules, which, to my mind, is useless at best and probably downright misleading. Rules on what must be reported post-race by trainers have been improved recently and now state that we need to report only things which might have 'materially' affected the horse's performance (previously we were expected to report anything which might have affected the horse's performance and, if taken literally, we would have needed to write a book on every horse) but examples are given of things which must be reported under this rule and I assume from this that the BHA believe these are things which materially affect performance.

We must report if the horse loses a shoe but there is no requirement to ensure that the shoe was lost during the race rather than after the winning post. Most shoes are lost when pulling up after the race but this is regularly reported to punters as if it had a material effect.

WE must report if the horse was unsuited by the going, but I would argue that we have no way of knowing, from one run, that a horse is unsuited by certain going and that this can only be determined by studying form. Yet it is often reported as fact and sometimes it is the opinion of a rider who has never ridden the horse on any other occasion.

There are other examples which are equally, or more, ridiculous and it concerns me greatly that we are passing such nonsense on to the public as if it were fact. It also concerns me greatly that

this information is also passed to, and acted upon, by BHA handicappers. It is not unusual to have these reports thrown back at you when querying why a handicapper decided not to drop a horse as much as others that finished in front of it.

In contrast to this thirst for 'information' it seems that there is a complete disregard for the need to educate the public about the sport and enable them to make more objective assessments themselves. Ascot have, thankfully, restored the details of race conditions in their racecards but there was a time when they believed that the public had no interest in race conditions and didn't need to know why one horse was carrying 9st 7lb and another in the race had 8st 3lb. Going descriptions are left to those, Clerks of Courses, with a vested interest and they are not officially corrected after the event by time, wind etc.. Reports made by trainers or jockeys about suitability of ground refer only to the official going so, while the trainer's opinion of how the horse acted on the ground is taken as gospel, his opinion on why that was the case or what the true going was is completely ignored.

One of our sport's most important selling points is its simplicity: you don't need to understand the rules to know that the objective is to pass the post first. That makes the sport accessible and interesting to a huge number of people but those who are going to become fans or regular followers need to get more involved in the intricacies. We don't aid that involvement by bombarding them with misinformation and myth.

WHAT a wonderful Kingsley Kickback this month. We have had so much feedback that we had to put Peter Bell's excellent letter on a page by itself. I am delighted to see that so many people are reading the Klarion and are driven to comment. I was also hugely flattered by the short note from Jack Berry. I believe that Jack once clocked up 100 winners before Royal Ascot, and most of them two-year-olds, so we have a long way to go with the juveniles to match that.

I also loved Stuart Robinson's letter about the Green Party. He says he is not a party activist but it sounds to me like he should be. On the other hand, I was a little confused by Alasdair Ross's political statement. I'm not sure what point he is trying to make or how it relates to anything I said last month.

I HAVE long been frustrated by the media referring to son Charlie as my 'assistant trainer' and I have been at pains to point out to them that he was a veterinary student and should be concentrating on his studies. Well, Charlie is no longer a vet student, having passed his finals last month.

Well done, Charlie. I well remember the feeling. Results day was the worst, and then one of the best, days of my life.

Absent friends

WHEN you are a child, if you are lucky, you think that dying is something that only happens to old people. But then again, I suppose, you think that anyone over 40 is old.

As you get older you swing from meeting all your friends at birthday parties, through weddings, to a time when you seem to be attending more funerals than any other gatherings. It is inevitable and happens to us all, but it still seems that we, my family and team at MJR, have lost too many friends and relations in the last year and all to that broad range of diseases that

we collectively call 'cancer'.

My sister, Lyn, died just over a year ago; then our great friend Jill Dawson; our driver, and close confidant, Phil Marrison; and just last month our friend and regular MJR supporter for more than 20 years, Mel Pilkington.

Deirdre and I met Mel and Jane way back in 1993 on a boat trip during the first holiday we had after starting training. Mel told me of his interest in racing and of the successful retail clothing business he had already established in his early thirties and we met again soon after our return to hatch a plan for Mel to buy a racehorse. That first horse, The Aspecto Girl, failed to reach the frame in seven starts but, as we were later to discover,

Mel was not the type to be put off by a little setback. His next horse, Mister Aspecto, won 10 times for us and cemented the friendship that was to endure until his death.

Mel flitted between flat and jump racing, having several horses with Venetia Williams, and during his illness he had periods without a horse, but we would always meet up at York and Royal Ascot. In 2007 Jane called to save us being shocked when we would meet Mel at Ascot and see that he had had an arm amputated. A lump which Mel had had on his hand for three years and believed to be a tendon ganglion proved to be a malignancy and his arm had to be amputated soon after the diagnosis was confirmed.

But, when we saw Mel that year, he was his usual bubbly self and he told me how he had gone straight out and bought an automatic BMW so he could continue to drive. His illness didn't change him and he continued to ski, and run, even after losing a lung but, best of all, Mel retained his sense of humour throughout and laughed at his disabilities. He loved telling the story of how he broke his remaining arm while skiing and gleefully told of the daily functions that Jane had to perform for him while he was armless.

Mel was a great character and thinking of him reminds me of many fun times during the early part of my career. My thoughts are with Jane and their son Charlie.

