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When second isn't good enough

I AM often asked whether I get nervous before a race and the truthful answer is, 'very rarely, these days'. It isn't that I have become blasé about winning: more that I have come to accept that being beaten is not the end of the world or even the end of the road for most horses. You move on and live to fight another day.

I did, however, admit to the press that I was nervous before Lumiere's Cheveley Park Stakes and that it was the first time for a very long time. Frankly, I'm not sure when the last time was, but the last horse I remember really being nervous about was Attraction. It is certainly not because there was particular pressure from either horse's owner. The Duke of Roxburghe could not have been

better in his approach to Attraction and was at pains, after her third start and first Listed class win, to remind us all that the filly owed us nothing and that anything she did would be a bonus. And Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed and everyone connected with Darley Stud has experienced the highest of highs and lowest of lows in horseracing. They put no pressure on me as a trainer.

Nervous

But, when I have a horse so good that I think it might just be the best in its class, I put pressure on myself. There are times when second will not be good enough and, at those times, I get nervous.

It is ridiculous to suggest, of course,

that second in a Group 1 race is not good enough. In reality, to have a horse good enough to run in a Group 1 race and hold its own is really exceptional. And I know that more than most. I was not nervous before the Lowther at York and I was far from devastated by finishing second to another great filly. But, at that stage, I really wasn't sure what we had. She had only won a maiden, albeit in spectacular fashion, and I was well aware that I could be asking too much of her to jump from that level to the Group 2 Lowther Stakes.

On that occasion, second place was enough to tell me that we might just have something of the very highest calibre on our hands. To win would have been even better but to finish second was enough.

I expected her to come on significantly for that run and so, by the time we came to Newmarket, I had convinced myself that it was down to my team to produce her at peak for that race and, if we did, she should win.

Internal

Come the day, I felt that we had failed in our task. The long hair under her belly told me that her internal clock was preparing her for winter while we were trying to prepare her for the Cheveley Park. I thought I'd got it wrong and I was nervous.

She saved the day and made the year for us and the nerves beforehand made the winning all the more satisfying and thrilling. Perhaps the presence of her mother and full sister in paddocks at home added to that thrill but it was not about them. It is all about the dream of having a true champion and the anticipation that comes with each step of the journey.

RECENTLY we were looking through old photographs of horses galloping and Charlie singled out one in which Attraction was powering away from her companions (see picture on left). He pointed out that one of those trailing in her wake had won a Group 1 itself and he asked: 'Why don't we have horses like that anymore?'

The answer is simple. They are very rare things, but we might just have found another. I hope I'll be as nervous next time she runs.

CELEBRATING STAMINA

I AM delighted to see that the BHA and TBA are committed to encouraging the breeding, buying and racing of staying-bred horses and that they are undertaking some changes in the programme with the aim of doing so. I am not certain, however, that the planned changes will have the desired effect although I freely admit that I have no simple alternative to offer.

It is their intention to introduce a number of maiden races, over distances ranging from seven furlongs to one mile and one furlong, restricted to horses whose sires won over a mile and a quarter or more. Can that really encourage the use of middle-distance sires or the purchase of their progeny just because there are a few extra maiden races available? I'm not sure, particularly as some of the races will be run over seven furlongs and we all know that some sires which won over middle-distances do not actually prove to be an influence for stamina or vice-versa.

Would it not be simpler, and more effective, to run a few more races over longer distances? That way, the two-year-olds themselves would need to demonstrate that they did actually possess some stamina, not simply that their father had demonstrated the ability to win at 10 furlongs (at any age).

It is also planned to introduce a 10-furlong Conditions race in early November 'with the intention that it would gain Listed status, though it would have to earn its keep first'. By this I assume that Ruth Quinn, the BHA director of international racing and

racing development, means that the race would have to demonstrate that it could meet the necessary criteria, in terms of average rating of the first four home, to be allocated Listed Status. Fat chance. It is hard to imagine how any Conditions race ever makes that jump, when Conditions races are generally such a failure, never mind one run over 10 furlongs for two-year-olds. I hope I'm wrong but I fear that such a race will inevitably have a small field and there could be a vast discrepancy in ratings between the winner and the placed horses.

AS I say, I don't have the answer but I do wonder if more opportunities for middle-distance and staying fillies might help. Breeders are often put off using the longer distance sires for fear that their mare produces a filly which will be of significantly less value than those bred for speed. Colts are perceived as having more residual value for jump racing, if they don't make the highest grade on the flat. Maybe if fillies were afforded a few more opportunities and, in particular, a few more opportunities to grasp the Holy Grail that is 'Black Type' by running over further, we would see more dams with stamina retained for breeding. Then again, under the current system, how could these races 'earn their keep' and ever hope to achieve or keep their Listed status?

It is difficult to have any faith in there being a true desire to promote stamina when we have so recently seen the Queen's Vase downgraded.



Left: Mark congratulates William Buick in the winner's enclosure after Lumiere's Group 1 win; Above: Deirdre and Attraction leave their work companions behind on Middleham High Moor, including Group 1 winner Pearl Of Love (right, under Paul Howard)

