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A special horse

FIRE FIGHTING really is a special horse. On October 16 he won the Listed Carlingford Stakes at Dundalk by five lengths on his 22nd start of 2015 and his 37th start since May 2014.

It is a remarkable record by anyone's standards but I have to ask myself, and all owners and trainers should ask themselves, could more horses do it? I think they could. What's more, in many cases, I think a continuous regular pattern of racing like this might be good for them. I have to wonder, can he race more regularly than most because he is especially tough and free from injury, or is he tough and free from injury because he races so regularly? It could well be the latter.

Of course there is a risk attached to every race (so I may be tempting fate here!) and the risk of injury, when racing, is greater than the risk when cantering on the gallops. And the risk when cantering is greater than that when walking and trotting which, in turn, is greater than that when standing in the box.

I could minimise injuries if the horses never left the box and reduce them greatly if I never, or rarely, took the horses beyond a trot. Similarly, footballers could minimise their injuries if they didn't play football but that, obviously, is as ridiculous as having racehorses which don't race.

It is clearly the case that if running at

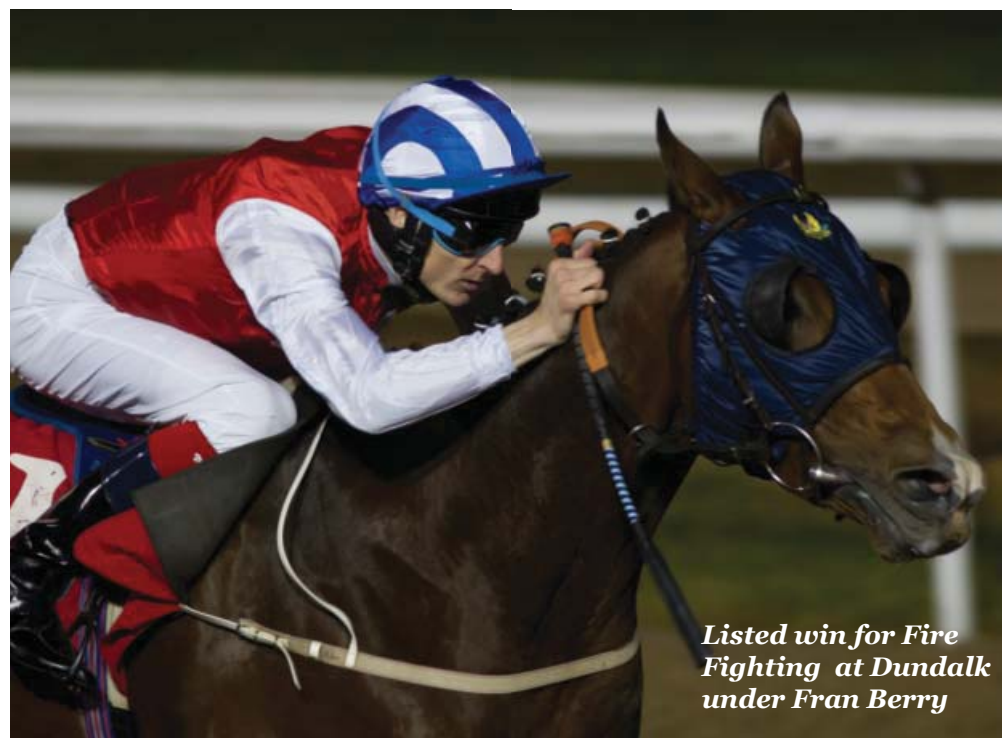
racing pace carries an increased risk of injury, then the more often we run a horse, the more often we subject it to that increased risk. But it is much more important for me, as a trainer, to consider whether the number of previous races increases the risk in each subsequent individual run. It is widely assumed that it does, but that could well be wrong.

Arguable

Of course, if a horse suffers subclinical damage or an undetected injury and is not given enough time to recover between races, then the damage could be compounded by further racing and the risk of a catastrophic failure increased. But it is equally arguable that nothing conditions a horse, and particularly its bone, for galloping except galloping and prolonged periods without doing fast work or galloping at racing pace may, in fact, increase the risk of injury when the horse is asked to perform at that level.

A recent study has suggested that, to produce optimum bone density and condition, horses should be worked at close to maximum speed, albeit over short distances, every other day. I am not aware of any trainer taking that approach but I don't think the findings should be totally dismissed.

Since May 2014, Fire Fighting has only twice had two consecutive days



Listed win for Fire Fighting at Dundalk under Fran Berry

without being ridden and that was when travelling to and from Dubai. Since the beginning of February 2014 the longest period he has had without cantering is 22 days and that was when we were attempting to 'freshen him up' for that trip to Dubai.

ICANNOT say that this regime would suit all horses and I know as well as anyone that, with the best will in the world, things go wrong and most horses don't stay sound enough for long enough to get into such a regular pattern of work and racing. But often it is the tendency to look for a reason for every, apparently, below-par run which leads to us giving horses a longer break

between runs than is necessary and prevents them from getting into a regular routine like Fire Fighting's.

Luckily, Fire Fighting's longest run of unplaced starts since July 2014 is four (five if you class third of five in a Group 3 race as unplaced) and that took place in August and September this year. On at least one occasion during that period the rider reported that the horse felt 'flat' and had perhaps 'had enough for the year', but we could see nothing wrong with him. Owner Alan Spence and I could see other valid reasons for his performance, and we decided to try again. Thankfully, we did, as his latest two starts have been among the best performances of his career.

we were not prepared to see him go for less than 150,000.

Examine

The number of viewers did nothing to dent our confidence and, when four went to the lengths of sending vets to examine

him, we thought he might go close to topping the day's proceedings.

Surely, no vet could find fault. They hardly need look at the horse. His record speaks for itself: 22 starts this year and a winner, by five lengths, just 11 days before the sale. There, surely, isn't a sounder horse in training.

Preparing for winter

AS we come to the end of the turf season, horses are departing through sales, to the breeding industry, or into retirement from racing and our yards are dominated by the influx of yearlings which must be broken and prepared for next year. But many - more than half - of this year's team will remain to continue racing and I must plan a winter regime for them. Some will race on through the winter months on the all-weather, and there is more than enough of that. but some are already looking forward to next spring.

I'm not sure if it is because of the recent exploits of Fire Fighting or because I have some top-class horses, including Lumiere and Buratino, which we shall be looking to produce to run at the very highest level first time out next year, but I find myself wondering about the wisdom of giving horses a 'break'.

From way back in the days of Mister Baileys and Double Trigger in the early 1990s it has been my policy to keep the colts walking and trotting from the end of the turf season until Christmas or until they become too fresh to be safe on the roads. The best fillies always did the same but, back then, many of the others went home to their owners or to livery yards for a break.

It has to be said that that policy, to some extent, was forced upon me because I didn't have the facilities to turn horses out, most of my owners

didn't have the facilities to keep colts, and I wouldn't entrust my best horses to others.

Now we have, if I say so myself, first-class facilities for turnout at Kingsley Park and we have numerous options for keeping horses without riding them. And so I find myself questioning whether the widely accepted idea that young racehorses will benefit from a break from training is driven by a desire to do what is best for the horse and a thorough knowledge of their physiology, a tendency to attribute human characteristics to horses, or simple economics.

We know that many athletes carry chronic injuries and problems through the season which might get a chance to recover with a period of rest. But we also know, to our cost, that horses coming back from a period of rest (e.g. those recovering from surgery and acute injuries that resulted in a period of enforced inactivity) are particularly prone to injury, especially stress fractures of the pelvis and hind limb, as we build them back up to peak fitness.

PERHAPS freedom to run in the paddock provides enough bone loading to prevent that crucial loss of density but, as we get into winter, the weather and underfoot conditions are not always conducive to having young racehorses out in fields. It is not an easy balance to strike.

ON the back of his latest victory at Dundalk, Fire Fighting was despatched to the Tattersalls' Horses-in-Training sales at the end of October with high hopes that he would be one of the star lots.

It is very hard to put accurate values on horses at any time and his owner,

Alan Spence, and I were aware that the fact that he had run so often and would be considered fully 'exposed' would devalue him, despite his current BHA rating of 109 and the fact that he had won on his latest, very recent, start.

Nonetheless, we thought that he might make in excess of 200,000 guineas and

But, we were wrong. I bought the horse back in for 85,000 guineas and the under-bidder told me that the vet report 'wasn't that great'. Eh? I'd love to see that report and discuss it with the vet who produced it. A veterinary examination for purchase is supposed to determine whether the horse is fit for the pur-

pose for which it is being purchased.

Unless the vet had been told that this horse was going to be used to pull a very large cart, I cannot see how he or she could conclude that it was other than in perfect condition for the job.

