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Richard Hughes: Trainer and Diplomat

IT was interesting to see Richard Hughes, in his Racing Post column, criticising Channel 4's coverage of racing without causing anything like the furore that I did.

Maybe I have to admit that he is a lot more diplomatic than I am but I like to tell it as it is and not mince my words. We call this column 'Straight Talking' for a reason.

Richard said that Channel 4 Racing over the last few years 'has not been any fun to watch'. I said it is boring.

He said: 'There is too much talk on Channel 4 Racing about facts, betting odds and the opinions of too many people'. I said there is too much coverage of betting and tipping.

Staggered

I totally agree with him that Matt Chapman will inject some fun into the ITV coverage although I was staggered to hear that they intend to have him cover the betting ring. That strikes me as a terrible waste but I'll reserve judgement until I have seen what he can do with it.

And it was not until reading Richard's column that I discovered that Jason Weaver is going to be on the ITV team. That is great news. I thoroughly enjoy listening to the banter between Jason and Luke Harvey even though I have no interest in the racing they are showing. Conversely, I watch Racing UK with the sound turned down.

Ironically, Attheraces currently have the best TV coverage with the worst racing. ITV can surely learn something from that.

Project X

THE Klarion team have been nagging me since March to continue the series I started on training facilities but I struggle to get this column done during the busy months, never mind write another. I am not, therefore, promising to continue it, although there is far more chance of me doing it in the winter.

I must, however, give you an update to our February issue, when I wrote about lunge rings, and tell you of a little project that has been going on quietly at Kingsley Park over the last few months.

When Michael Dickinson sold us his Tapeta surface back in 2008 his number one unique selling point seemed to be that he only used 'virgin fibres' in the mix. He told us that, unlike most of the rivals, Tapeta was not made from waste products and he assured us of the significance of

using specially selected new materials.

There were other reasons for choosing Tapeta over others on the market and I have never regretted that choice, but the statement about 'virgin fibres' stuck in my mind and made a lot of sense to me. I was, therefore, most surprised when I first walked on the Newcastle Tapeta surface and noted that there were relatively large quantities of waste carpet in the mix.

Principles

It seems that Michael Dickinson, and others, may have changed their minds on what makes the best surface – the new High Moor gallop in Middleham is made entirely of waste carpet – but I had been sold the principles of 'virgin fibres' when we installed the Kingsley Park Tapeta and I haven't found any reason to doubt those



Kingsley Park lunge rings with our home-made all-weather surface

theories since.

I decided to set Nicky McGrath the task of sourcing the best materials from around the globe, and then Martin Smith (haylage producer and Kingsley Park farm manager) and I set about experimenting with different mixes. With a set of digital scales and a number of plastic tubs, we turned the office kitchen into something resembling the Great

British Bake Off on a few occasions this summer and this has culminated in us recently replacing the surface in the three Fibresand lunge rings with different mixes of our own material.

We are absolutely delighted with the results and we are confident that, by the time our main gallop needs topping up or replacing, we will be in a position to do so with a custom-made material of our

own. We have learned a lot about the materials involved and their costs and we can appreciate why commercial gallop producers turn to the recycling industry for some of their materials, but it will be exciting to produce our own gallop surface in the knowledge we have mixed it to our own specification.

THERE are now many different types of equestrian surfaces and a whole new generation of 'consultants' who can tell you what is best and how it should be managed and maintained. But, with all due respect to those who have become recognised as experts, I have trained on synthetic surfaces for 27 years and I am fairly sure that I have had more runners and more winners on synthetic surfaces than any other trainer in the world. I have seen what works well and I have seen what can go wrong. Now I will see whether I can put this knowledge to good use and make the best possible surface for Kingsley Park. Time will tell.

UNPALATABLE

ON October 18, Hugh Hart's Dasheen was due to run at Yarmouth in what was his last opportunity to enhance his value before heading to Tattersalls for sale. As many of you will know, the race was abandoned due to insufficient medical cover after a doctor decided to accompany a jockey with a broken ankle to hospital.

Several owners and trainers, led by Mark Tompkins, have been seeking some compensation from ARC, the owners of Yarmouth racecourse, but all to no avail.

Dasheen left Middleham the day before, as is normal practice when we have a horse running at Yarmouth, with travelling manager Tristan Burton-Pye and one other member of staff. I was in France at the sales, Charlie was at Newcastle where we had other runners and owners attending, and Deirdre opted to remain at home as Hugh was not going to see the horse run.

If one of us had gone to Yarmouth our costs would have been very significantly greater but, as it was, the cost of taking

Dasheen to Yarmouth was £662.67 for staff wages and expenses, fuel (based on our vehicle doing 33mpg which sounds more like a manufacturer's claim for a bare chassis rather than the reality for a loaded horsebox), and racing plates. This, of course, excludes the depreciation and other running costs on that vehicle, which are considerable.

If Dasheen had run, we would have charged out for the above expenses at a total of £711.50 but he did not run and I have long operated a policy of 'no run – no charge'. Unlike ARC and other racecourse managers, I have never found it acceptable to charge owners when they have had nothing in return. In Britain, with the paltry returns from prize-money, owners' participation in our sport is often hanging in the balance and I would rather swallow these costs than give an owner a very unpleasant reminder of how much they put in for so little in return.

Obviously the directors of ARC and Yarmouth racecourse have no such qualms.

☐ **THE TURF season ends in a few days' time but we continue racing now on the all-weather with far more races than ever before.**

Unfortunately, few, if any, of my owners are particularly excited by the winter racing and I will struggle to muster a significant team again this year. That is a pity as there are some very good races and some significant prize-money on offer, but all-weather racing has become associated with low-grade betting-fodder and too much of it, and that is an image that will be very hard to shake off.

It most certainly isn't the fault of the tracks or the all-weather surfaces and there have been many times this summer when I have wondered why I am so opposed to the further expansion of all-weather racing. At least you know what you are getting in terms of a sound racing surface on which most horses will act and the form is relatively consistent.

Most, if not all, British turf tracks have deteriorated over the past decade due to constant watering, which now continues on some tracks right into the autumn months. If all-weather racing is the future for British racing then those who have ruined the turf tracks, those who altered the rules to allow this to happen, and those who pull their horses out at the mere mention of the word 'firm' will only have themselves to blame.

Crowley on top

VERY many congratulations to Jim Crowley on winning the 2016 Flat Jockeys' Championship.

To my mind he is a worthy winner as he has been riding winners all year. He is also the leading jockey for the calendar year to date, and it seems that he is going to continue riding in Britain rather than shooting off to warmer climes with richer pickings.

Inevitably some people are again querying why we have a jockeys' championship that runs for only half the year and some, including Steve Dennis of the Racing Post, are calling for the Flat season to start the day after Champions Day and run for 12 months. Please, let's not go there again.

While I totally agree that the championships should all run for 12 months, we cannot escape from the fact that Flat horses run in age groups and have their birthdays on January 1. The season must run for the calendar year so that we can see who has performed best with, and on, the various age groups. The current system is a mess, devalues the jockeys' and owners' championships and detracts from the historical significance of the results.



Jim Crowley