



mark@markjohnstonracing.com

Trials fit for purpose?

I am, of course, delighted to have offered Racing Post journalist Lee Mottershead an opportunity to reply in the Klarion to John Scanlon's criticism of his stance on racecourse gallops (see Kickback page 10). But what, exactly, is he trying to say?

He says he quite understands why I did not want to run Lumiere and Buratino in the recognised trials. Does he? Does he also then understand why the trainers of Emotionless, Marcel, Massaat, and the Guineas winner Galileo Gold didn't want to run them either? He doesn't appear to understand at all.

He clearly seems to think that denying trainers the opportunity to gallop their horses on a raceday will increase the number and quality of participants in the trials. Does he really think that the principal protagonists are going to take each other on for a little over £30,000 at Group 3 level as part of their preparation for the main event? For John Scanlon to describe his views as 'hopelessly naive' was, perhaps, a little strong – I think naive would do.

Trials are vitally important stepping stones for some horses en route to the Classics and other Group 1s. But it is naive to expect them to have big fields and it is naive to expect more than one

or, at most, two principal Classic contenders to run in each trial. Lumiere had her trial in the Cheveley Park last autumn; Buratino stamped himself as a Guineas contender way back in June and cemented his position when finishing second in the Middle Park in September; Emotionless won the Group 2 Champagne Stakes in September; Marcel won the Racing Post trophy; Massaat finished second behind Air Force Blue in the Dewhurst; and Galileo Gold won the Vintage Stakes at Goodwood before finishing second in a French G1.

These horses had all completed their



Buratino and groom Paddy Trainor

trials and the next obvious step was to bring them together with other Group winners in a Classic race. To have them go head-to-head with their principal rivals in races such as the Craven, the Greenham and the Nell Gwyn would have had one certain outcome -- a reduction of the field and the interest in the Guineas.

Mottershead, in his Racing Post column on April 18, referred to the racecourse gallops and said 'racegoers will also have enjoyed seeing the horses. But racegoers would surely have preferred to see them actually racing. Particularly as the Craven and Free Handicap lacked strength and depth'. The Craven had six runners with official handicap ratings, in finishing order, of 112, 110, 108, 106, 95 and 98 – a solid Group 3 race and a good trial. The Free Handicap has lost its way a bit, desperately needs a change in conditions and prize-money, and can hardly be called a trial these days but it attracted six runners with an average rating of 106. Not bad for a Listed handicap with under £21,000 to the winner. Lee Mottershead can't seriously be suggesting that any of the horses he referred to should have run in that, can he?

He has obviously fallen into the trap

of believing that the competitiveness of a race is directly proportional to the number of runners.

Newmarket has an eminently sensible policy on racecourse gallops in that it allows any horse which holds a Group 1 entry to gallop before or after racing. It is a great pity that more tracks don't adopt the same policy and those, like Lee Mottershead, who would like to deny top horses an opportunity to visit a racecourse and get the experience without actually racing should consider the fact that the Curragh allowed Aidan O'Brien to gallop no fewer than 50

in the middle of the Cheltenham festival, I wrote: 'Yesterday we saw a Champion Hurdle that will surely go down in history. Only the fourth mare ever to win the race; a track record; a fourth Champion Hurdle in the last six years for trainer Willie Mullins; comparisons with the mighty Dawn Run and talks of an attempt at emulating that mare in the Gold Cup; and an emotional Ruby Walsh dedicating the win to 'little Annie', daughter of the Mullins team's vet Tim Brennan, who is battling cancer.

'What a story. A media man's dream. Jam-packed full of 'narrative' – the buzz

Newmarket has an eminently sensible policy on racecourse gallops

horses after racing at their March meeting. Would he like to see British horses denied the same opportunities?

John Scanlon finished his piece with a suggestion that Lee Mottershead and his colleagues in the racing media should put more effort into writing about racing as a sport rather than being tipsters. And Mottershead has replied with a claim that they do write about the sport but he says that it is, 'perhaps easier to portray those stories when covering jump racing as its participants are, generally, more interesting to readers and better at promoting the sport'. Ouch!

How can I reply to that? Well, quite easily really.

I'd like to refer Lee Mottershead to my 'Bletherings' on April 16 this year (www.markjohnstonracing.com) when,

word that gets the marketing team at Great British Racing so excited.

'So, where would you expect to find the story in racing's trade paper? Front page? When we had a dedicated trade paper it would have been, but the Racing Post put it on page 22. Is anyone on the editorial staff at that newspaper even interested in racing? They clearly don't believe that their readership is.'

I can tell you that the first 21 pages of the paper on that day were filled with tipping.

That said, Mottershead's Monday column is one of the tiny islands of true journalism in a paper that is now, principally, dedicated to promoting betting, not the sport of horse racing. Sadly, on this occasion, he just got it wrong.

Who's who in racing

I am sure most of you will have noticed that son Charlie is now working full-time in the business and part of his job involves going racing.

Recently he pointed out that he often has difficulty knowing which racecourse official is which and how, for example, to tell a Clerk of the Course from a Stipendiary Steward.

This is something that I still find difficult myself but I gave up complaining about it a couple of decades ago.

They all wear the same little silver BHA badge which, as far as I can see, is very similar to the BHB badge which, in turn, was very similar to the Jockey Club officials badge.

As a result we have to make educated guesses as to who is who based on information such as: the one sitting in the middle in the weighing room is usually the Clerk of the Scales; the one sitting to one side, who disappears before the start of the race, is probably the starter but could be the judge; the one wearing a suit and a trilby, who looks a bit like a Steward, and sometimes carries a radio, is probably a Stipendiary Steward; the one who looks the same as a Stipendiary Steward but walks a couple of paces behind is a Stewards' Secretary; the one who wears a suit and a trilby and looks a bit like a steward and never carries a radio, is a Steward; and the one in the wellies is the Clerk of the Course. That's the men. For women there is a completely different dress code which I haven't even begun to work out.

Following the wettest winter in my memory we started the Flat season with the usual controversy over watering. I had hoped that most racecourses would have had more than enough water over the last few months but it seems not. Many clerks are still trickling it on.

As I have often said before, I have the utmost sympathy for them. Most know that, if they produce the optimum Flat racing ground, Good to Firm, they will have more non-runners than on Good or even softer. And, if they do aim for optimum ground and it dries out to Firm, they are in danger of having mass

defections.

I can understand why they aim for softer than the optimum but the policy of regular watering is doing untold damage to the tracks.

I have recently been wondering why we have positioned the optimum ground conditions nearer to one end of our scale rather than have it in the middle.

The current going description scale is Heavy: Soft: Good to Soft: Good: Good to Firm: Firm: Hard, and it is accepted that the descriptions differ for Flat and jump racing i.e. Good jumping ground would be considered Good to Soft for Flat racing (maybe even Soft).

The BHA advises courses to aim for Good ground for jumping and this, of course, sits right in the middle of the going scale. For Flat racing, the courses are instructed to aim for Good to Firm but, with this sitting closer to the Hard end of the scale, in practice, clerks aim for softer than that which is considered optimum.

Why not move the scale so that what we now call Good to Firm, and the BHA considers to be the optimum racing surface for Flat horses, is called Good and sits in the middle of the scale? I am sure that this simple change would result in less watering, fewer non-runners and more consistent form.

Last month I encouraged those of you who are involved in ownership, and have a horse trained by me, to read James Willoughby's piece on intervals between runs. I'm not sure how many took my advice. If you missed it, and you don't still have last month's Klarion stored in the loo, you can find it at www.markjohnstonracing.com. Go to the Klarion page, and among "Other Stories" select Study the Stats.

I urge you, again, to read his latest column as this month he tells us all about riding tactics. It is music to my ears. I came to the same, or very similar conclusions from a basic knowledge of physics and from watching Martin Pipe's runners in the late 70s and early 80s.