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The man who kicked the hornet's nest

STEVE DENNIS, in the Racing Post's Countdown To Goodwood, refers to me as 'the man who kicked the hornet's nest'. He doesn't know how close to the truth he is.

The first six years of my life were spent living on a council estate in East Kilbride – then one of the 1960s 'new towns' providing overspill for Glasgow. At the end of Napier Hill, where we lived, was a conifer plantation – no doubt a planner's idea of retaining an element of countryside but in reality just camouflage for all the activities that couldn't take place in the open – and a regular summer activity for small boys was to go in the 'planny' and fight wasp nests. We would arm ourselves with branches and Squeezy bottles (Fairy Liquid bottles if you were posh!) and search out a hornets' nest to kick. To this day I have a lump on the side of my neck where I was stung and a well-meaning neighbour, being a little

confused over some old home remedy, put Domestos on it.

I hung up my stick and my Squeezy bottle 50 years ago and I have no desire to try it again, but a little of that sense of adventure remains and I still like to rattle a few cages. Sometimes, I forget to check that they are locked.

And, it seems, I have done it again. I have upset half the writers in the Racing Post (the other half fear for their jobs

Bletherings (www.markjohnstonracing.com) about the new Top Gear. Another thing most of you, and all of those whose only interaction with me is to ask 'will it win', don't know about me is that I am a self-confessed petrolhead. I have been tinkering with cars since the age of 10, dreaming of super-cars for as long as I have dreamt of super-racehorses, and watching Top Gear, on and off (now mostly off), for as long as I can remember.

In Bletherings I wrote: "I just watched the second episode of the new Top Gear. I was away last Sunday and so was unable

to watch the first episode live. I did have it recorded but have to admit that I fell asleep halfway through watching it. This week's was a lot better but still a major disappointment.

"For me, it is not that the new team are not every bit as good as the last. I think they are and the change is refreshing. Clarkson's political

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and daren't say that they agree with me), all the bookmakers, and a large band of punters who either can't read, didn't read what I actually said, or didn't understand it. Ha! Ha! There I go again, you can rest assured that I've just upset a few more.

This all started way back on June 5 with a comment I made in my online

JOHN MCCRIRICK, apparently, joined the debate in his column in the Sun and tried, like a few others, to brand my comments on racing coverage as elitist. I haven't read his article – I don't get the Sun, does that make me elitist? – but I have seen him quoted as saying: "If Mark Johnston had his way racing would be run on private estates and nobody would care".

That is ridiculous, especially coming from the Harrow boy whose whole act is based on his detachment from reality. What I am advocating is coverage that appeals to a much wider audience, not just those who want a betting opportunity every few minutes.

To use another Top Gear analogy, the programme started back in 1977 and it aimed to appeal to, believe it or not, drivers. It told you how to get your Morris Minor through its MOT and how to change the head gasket on your Ford Anglia. It was boring.

Along came Clarkson in 2002 and they started slating

those who rode bicycles, holidayed in a caravan, or drove an 'uncool' car. They raced Lamborghinis and Ferraris around an old airfield and, unless they were trying to blow it up, never tested a car worth less than a couple of year's wages of the average person.

Is that elitist? Of course it is. Did it only appeal to a small elite group who could afford a Lamborghini or a Ferrari? No, it had massive viewing figures and it appealed to all sections of society and all members of the family.

That's what I want for racing. To share the excitement with as many people as possible. To educate them and inform them about the sport. To give them a basic understanding so they can have their own opinions.

Clarkson and his team were constantly controversial and they provoked opinions about those Lamborghinis and Ferraris from people who drove clapped-out Ford Escorts.

incorrectness was a breath of fresh air in the early days and helped make it a 'not to be missed' programme for me but the format was very tired and latter episodes were, frankly, boring.

Disappointing

"I was hoping that the new Top Gear would arrive with a completely new format but sadly not. It is pretty much the same as the old programme and that is very disappointing.

"Let's hope that ITV don't make the same mistake when they take over the coverage of racing from Channel 4. I am assuming that there will be a magazine programme to replace The Morning Line and I am dearly hoping that they take the opportunity to come up with a new format that might bring a whole new audience to racing. Channel 4's various reincarnations of The Morning Line have done little or nothing to make the

programme appeal to anyone other than punters and, personally, I think it should be possible to produce a programme that appeals to all the family. Here's hoping."

Nothing was said about my comments until Go Racing in Yorkshire held a press day at our yard on July 11 and the Racing Post's David Carr asked me about these comments and about what I would do with ITV coverage of racing. I told him and, to be fair, he published the gist of it. I said that we needed a programme that appealed to the whole family, that would interest people, encourage them to have their own opinions, and that, if they had their own opinions, they would bet. When pressed on the detail of how I would do it, I said I'd cut out all the chat about betting.

It made the front page – a refreshing change in itself – and then the dung hit the air conditioner. They all came out of the woodwork with all the same old drivel: 'Mark Johnston is anti-betting', 'Mark Johnston wants to ban betting', 'there would be no racing without betting', punters pay for all that prize-money that goes to make rich racehorse

owners richer', and so on. Oh, and Lee Mottershead called me 'naive' – try again in 10 years, Lee.

If nothing else, my comments have started an important debate about future coverage of racing and, hopefully, there will be those at ITV who might see the potential in thinking outside the box.

I WAS pleased to get the opportunity to air my views on The Morning Line on July 30 after those comments on tv coverage of betting drew such a response. During the interview I also criticised some aspects of the promotion of racing and specifically mentioned after-race concert nights, citing problems they can cause. That issue brought an even bigger response, and on the next two pages the Klarion carries just a small sample of the messages I received on each of these topics.

I was disappointed that there wasn't more time on tv to cover the countless ideas I do have to attract more people to racing. But, hopefully, these debates I have started will run and run and some good will come out of it all.

Fractions and furlongs

I'D love to be able to accept Stephen Woad's point (Kickback page 10) about traditions in racing as I too am an advocate of maintaining the unique traditional qualities that set British racing apart from the rest of the world, but unfortunately he takes his argument to a ridiculous level. Nobody is suggesting that we calibrate weights carried in hundredths or even tenths of kilos or that winning distances are measured in centimetres.

The important point, surely, is to ensure that your customers can understand the terms used in the sport and that we stick to words which are in common usage.

We do have a strange mix of metric and imperial measurements in our daily lives now as, for example, we drive our cars for miles and measure their fuel consumption in miles per gallon, but we buy that fuel in litres. But nobody can suggest that the furlong is in common usage or understood by more than a tiny percentage of the population. It is a measurement from a bygone era and, if we are to stick to imperial measures of distances in races, we might be better to follow the American line and refer to 8ths (of a mile) and 16ths. At least that way our followers might come to understand what a furlong means.

He also would like to see all



horses in Britain sold in guineas. Why? We can't go back to pounds, shillings and pence and adding 5% under the guise of tradition, which to me, borders on fraudulent practice. It bears no relation to the market trader who wants to sell his bananas in pounds because he and his customers understand pounds rather than kilos – that makes perfect sense.