



mark@markjohnstonracing.com

Weighty problem moving in the wrong direction

SATURDAY May 27 was a great day for the yard. Perhaps, not the best day in May 2017 as that accolade should still go to Thursday the 18th when Permian won the Dante Stakes and catapulted himself into the Derby picture. But, numerically, May was beginning to look like a fairly quiet month for us until five winners on that Saturday turned the tables.

The highlight was, arguably, Sutter County's victory in Goodwood's £100,000 Winners Are Welcome At Matchbook Handicap but the race highlights a few interesting issues which have previously been debated in the Klarion.

Twelve horses were declared for the race and, even with two non-runners, it was a respectable field by most people's standards, although four of those originally declared, including the two non-runners, were out of the handicap. However, one of those non-runners, Sea Shack trained by William Knight, was scratched because a suitable jockey – i.e. one who could do the weight – could not be found.

That begs two fairly serious questions. Firstly, is there simply too much racing on a Saturday and, in particular, too much racing of a similar level, for the available horse and jockey population? There were flat meetings at York, Goodwood, Haydock, and neighbouring Chester in the afternoon; Salisbury in the evening; and the Irish 2000 Guineas meeting at the Curragh. And, secondly, why are we framing races with unnecessarily low weights when there simply aren't enough lightweight jockeys to go round?

This race had a top weight of 9st 7lb and a minimum of

8st. In the past, 3yo-only handicaps had a top weight of 9st 10lb and, if that was still the case, the same weight range could obviously be covered with a minimum of 8st 3lb. Why have we moved in the wrong direction when we all know that people are getting bigger and that it is more difficult to find lightweight jockeys?

WE DO HAVE a Mark Johnston Racing Twitter account, which I use to announce those rare occasions when I add something to my 'Bletherings' on our website, but I don't really follow any of the daily racing banter on Twitter. So it was only thanks to the Racing Post's Dikler that I read of the little spat between Dale Gibson, Executive Director (Racing) of the Professional Jockeys Association, and Richard Fahey.

Dale Gibson apparently tweeted about a horse of Richard Fahey's which ran 24 hours after being declared a non-runner and said, "Good luck to Society Red in the Silver Bowl at Haydock having been unable to run yesterday at the same venue"

Richard Fahey came back with "Owner wanted to run for 70K. Due to be balloted Sat. Fined £140 for not running. When u start paying training fees then u can have your say!" Touché.

Non-runners have always been a bee in Dale Gibson's

bonnet, but he sees the issue purely in terms of a jockey missing a riding fee and he appears to disregard the interests of those who provide the horses for trainers to train and jockeys to ride . . . the owners.

Ironically, he has always been one of those pressing hardest for weights in races to be kept as low as possible and when handicap ranges were reduced he called for the lowering of the top weights. He was not thinking of horse welfare (nobody ever suggested that the old weights were too high), and he clearly was not thinking of jockey welfare. He openly admitted that he wanted the weights kept low to 'provide opportunities for lightweight jockeys' like himself.

Staggering

It is blatantly obvious that a lightweight jockey can ride at higher weights with the addition of weight in the weight-cloth so reduction of the weights only provides opportunities for lightweight jockeys by depriving heavier colleagues. I know many jockeys who were forced into retirement because they were too heavy but I have never heard of a jockey who had to retire because he or she was too light. I, therefore, find it quite staggering that the BHA and the racecourses were duped into going along with this hare-brained scheme and that we are still suffering the legacy of that campaign.

WE should get the weights back to 9st 7lb in 2yo handicaps, 9st 10lb for 3yos and 10st for older horses with immediate effect. The BHA are pussyfooting around commissioning research into the effect of 'wasting' on jockeys while we continue to frame races with top weights lower than they were 20 years ago.

29 years . . . and still an incomer

IT was with some sadness but no surprise that I heard of the retirement of Middleham trainer Sally Hall. As far as I can see, she had not had a runner since January.

I think that makes me the longest-standing Middleham trainer. Of course, James Bethell has been training for longer than me, and I think Chris Fairhurst was born here, but I will now have been training longer in Middleham than any current licence holder. This is my 29th year here. How amazing is that? I think most Middleham residents still consider me an 'incomer' and upstart.

I well remember the day in 1993 when Sally approached me on the gallops as my string cantered by, pointed at a big bay colt, and said: 'Who's that colt by?' I said: 'Robellino', and Sally said: 'I think I'll send a mare to Robellino'.

A few months later, when the horse ran for the first time at Newcastle, her partner, Colin Platts, came and asked me: 'Is that Sally's Robellino colt?' I said it was and he said: 'I'd better have a few quid on it for her'.

The horse in question was Mister Baileys and, of course, he won first time and went on to defeat Grand Lodge, trained by Sally's nephew William Jarvis, in the Guineas.

She never has asked me about another horse, before or since, and I have always been struck by the fact that she saw the potential just watching my string canter by. I must remember to ask her whether she ever did send a mare to Robellino and what the result was.

STATING THE OBVIOUS?

IT is tough being John Scanlon, the main contributor of copy to the Kingsley Klarion, and having your personal comment column, 'Off the Bridle', stuck on page 23. In his ever-efficient way, John sends in his offerings well in advance, only to find that I have come along on the last day of the month, pinched his ideas, and stuck them on page 4 under my banner of 'Straight Talking'.

On the other hand, I can just claim that it is a case of great minds thinking alike and I promise that I was going to comment on James Willoughby's piece on riding tactics long before I knew that John Scanlon would too.

I first read Federico Tesio's *Breeding The Racehorse* more than 40 years ago at around the age of 15 and I think I may have read it again about 10 years later, but I had long forgotten that the great man made any comment on race tactics or pace. Maybe reading that book left something imprinted on my subconscious alongside the more conscious effect it had in giving me an interest in very basic genetics and the principles of inheritance.

James Willoughby sums up Tesio's thinking on pace and tactics with his statement that 'when a rider guides a mount to



Federico Tesio

run its fastest time for the distance, the horse will win all the races to which he is entitled and some of those which he is not.' Is that not pretty obvious? Clearly not, as so few jockeys ever attempt to follow those principles and many of the common instructions from owners and trainers such as 'get a lead' (regardless of pace???) totally preclude them from doing so.

Every day, if we watch

racing coverage on television, we hear many trainers and most pundits talking about tactics and the importance of 'cover' and when the jockey 'asked for an effort' but they rarely, if ever, explain how they think these actions might contribute to achieving the objective of covering the allotted distance in the shortest time.

These theories expounded by Tesio in the 1950s and firmly held by Willoughby in the 21st century, but which more properly should be credited to the likes of Newton in the mid-17th century, do not appear to be shared by the majority of those who own, train, ride or pontificate about the racehorses of today. I would genuinely like to understand why not and would welcome some explanation of alternative theories through Kickback.