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# My love affair with Ascot

ON the morning of Thursday June 22, 1995, Deirdre angrily asked me why I kept taking our best horses to Royal Ascot every year to get beaten. I have told that story countless times, but it was only when I received an email last week from a Peter Hadden, congratulating me on Oriental Fox's win, and asking me how Royal Ascot had changed for me since those early days, that I decided to look back at some of the runners we had before Double Trigger turned our Royal Ascot tide and consider how the Royal meeting has changed since.

Our first runner at that 1995 meeting was Gothenberg, who went into the Coventry Stakes having won his last three starts including the Listed Woodcote Stakes at Epsom 10 days earlier. He finished tenth of the 13 runners. Later in the day, in the Ascot Stakes, we were represented by Argyle Cavalier and Star Rage but could only finish 11th and 24th.

The next day we fared better, with two of our three runners reaching the winner's enclosure; Unconditional Love was fourth in the Queen Mary, and Double Eclipse was second, beaten a neck, in the Queen's Vase. Those, to my mind, looking back now, were extremely good runs, but they were coming on the back of 10 runners in 1994 of which only one, Pearl Kite, reached the frame and such yard stalwarts of the time as Quick Ransom, Marina Park, Branston Abby and Millstream met with defeat. And the year before, 1993, our two runners, Branston Abby and Beware of Agents, finished 8th and 10th in the Wokingham.

I haven't looked at all our runners prior to 1993 but I think my first-ever Royal Ascot runner was Addison's Blade in the 1989 Windsor Castle Stakes. He finished second and it is arguable that, with results like that from what was a very small, unknown stable at the time, it was inevitable that I was going to have a love affair with Royal Ascot; but Deirdre didn't see it that way until the winners started flowing in 1995.

## Field factors

LOOKING looking back at those Royal Ascot cards in the early 90s, the first thing that strikes me is the number of small fields.

The 1993 St James's Palace Stakes had only four runners; the Coventry Stakes in the same year had six; the Coronation, five; the Chesham, seven; and the Hardwicke, five. The average field size was 12.75 runners.

In 1994 the field sizes were much larger with a very healthy average of 15.37 and only the Norfolk Stakes (six) falling below

eight runners. This led me to consider if the going had had an impact on the field sizes. To my surprise, I found that the ground was Good-Soft on the first day in 1993 and Soft thereafter. In 1994 it was Good-Firm every day. Could it be that back in the early 90s it was the word 'soft' in a going description which resulted in small fields, whereas in 2017 it is the word 'firm'?

Perhaps not, as in 1995 the trend reversed again. With Good-Firm ground on the first three days, and Firm on the fourth, The Queen Anne attracted just seven runners; the Prince of Wales, six; the Ribblesdale, seven; the Gold Cup, seven; the Hardwicke, six; and the Queen Alexandra Stakes, just five. The average number of runners per race was 13.7.

In 2017, with six more races than we had back in the 90s, the average field size was 16.33 although we still had one race, the Coronation Stakes, with only seven runners.

## Tinkering with the Vase

SO, what else has changed in the time I have been attending Royal Ascot?

For a start, it is now five days instead of the four plus one day of Ascot Heath, as was the case when I started to go. I was always in favour of that change and cannot see any negative side to it so long as they can fill 30 quality races and they clearly can.

The other biggest change has been the building of the new grandstand and a new straight track. Overall, I am also pleased with that and accept that it had to be done. There are, of course, some things that appear to have been backward steps, but that was inevitable with a project of its size.

Many people reminisce over the good old days, with the half-mile hike to the old saddling boxes and the social gatherings in the old pre-parade ring, and I have some great memories of



*Ascot's imposing grandstand, one of biggest changes at the track*

those times, but I do think that the new facilities for owners and trainers are excellent. When I first started going I think owners and trainers just had the little cramped bar over the weighing room, but it did have direct access to a good viewing area in the stands. Later the gatehouse was converted to owners' and trainers' facilities and, at the time, most thought it was wonderful. It has clearly been surpassed by the new facility and the catering for owners is now excellent.

I think the only fundamental errors were made on the track, where we now have completely different surfaces on the straight and round tracks and, despite the straight track supposedly being state-of-the-art, there appears to be a bias at times which is caused by, or altered and exacerbated by, selective watering.

It seems major, and irreversible, mistakes were also made when setting out the levels of the stands and track and viewing on the lower levels is now poor. That said, Ascot is far from alone in failing to provide a good view of live racing. Many, if not most, tracks now rely on big screens and have no regard for an uninterrupted view from the stands. Doncaster and Newcastle

spring to mind as the worst examples of tracks where the view is continually deteriorating, but it is a common problem.

Overall, the facilities at Ascot are excellent and I am certain there is a will for continuous improvement.

I have seen many changes to the programme over the years and most have been for the better. Back in 1993 the Queen Anne was a Group 2, worth £53,194 to the winner; now it's a Group 1 with a first prize of £388,463. Likewise the Prince of Wales was a Group 2; the Coventry was a Group 3 and the Windsor Castle Stakes didn't even have Listed status.

The races are continuously evolving and changing which is no bad thing, but one of the most talked-about changes this year was the shortening of the Queen's Vase from two miles to 1m 6f and its jump back up from Listed to Group 2, having only recently been downgraded from its long-standing Group 3 status.

Overall, the facilities at Ascot are excellent

I never agreed with the change and still cannot see how you promote stayers – their apparent objective – by shortening the distance of races. This type of horse is at a stage where they are likely to be rapidly improving with age and distance so it is difficult to make an immediate assessment of this year's renewal but, at first glance, the changes appear to have had a negative effect. The system whereby pattern races are judged on the end-of-season ratings of the first four is a blunt instrument, especially when applied to races for slow-maturing horses, which I do not agree with. But the ratings, at this stage, for the Queen's Vase suggest that the standard has not altered for the increase to Group 2 status. The average rating of the first four going into the race this year, at 95, is on a par with past ratings but, despite the handicapper's attempt to aid their colleagues at the BHA by raising the average post-race to 100, it does not compare well with the day's other Group 2 race for 3yos, Permian's King Edward VII Stakes, run over just 400 metres less, where the average rating of the first four pre-race was 110 and rose after the event to 112.

I fear that it will prove difficult for the Pattern committee going forward to justify the Group 2 status, especially if the reduction in distance results in fewer great staying horses coming out of the race. The winners in 2012 and 2013, Leading Light and Estimate, went on to win the Gold Cup. And the fourth in 2014, the first year that it was run as a Listed race, was none other than this year's Gold Cup winner Big Orange who, for me, won the race of the meeting.

Clearly, as a two-mile race and a test for young stayers, the Queen's Vase was a perfect race. It wasn't broken, so why 'fix' it. And that is before we get into the question of whether the 1m 6f start is too close to the first bend. There were a few hard luck stories this year.

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— A level playing field? —

I think, overall, it is fairly clear that Royal Ascot races are more competitive than they were 20 years ago and that is in part thanks to the number of foreign visitors who have turned it into a truly international meeting.

The Australians played a big part from the early years of this century, especially in the sprint races, and I caused quite a stir and made a number of enemies Down Under when I queried whether we were playing on a level field with relation to the drug-use rules and the widespread use of anabolic steroids in some countries while their horses were ‘spelling’ or out of training.

That, as I have tried to explain many times, actually came about when the late Dandy Nicholls queried the subsidies being paid to foreign participants. I reminded Dandy that we, too, enjoy subsidised travel to many great international race meetings, but I added that all participants should be subject to the same rules and I questioned whether a horse which had tested positive for anabolic steroids in another jurisdiction, and whose trainer had freely admitted using the drugs, should compete at Ascot when a British trainer found to have used the same drugs would be subject to a lengthy ban.

At the time many people claimed that the Australian rules on anabolic steroids, which relied entirely on race-day clearance, were as effective in controlling the use of anabolics as our more draconian system. And some very learned veterinarians claimed that the effect of anabolic steroids were quite short-lived and, if the drug was not present in a urine sample, then there was no positive effect on performance.

However, times have moved on and most major racing nations now agree that the drugs can have a life-long effect on performance if used at any stage in a horse’s development. We have now banned the use, even in foals, although many breeders are still unhappy about this.

Some have suggested that the tightening of the drug rules have resulted in fewer visitors to Royal Ascot from Australasia, but that may just be coincidence. Their place, to some extent, has been taken by the Americans and they have certainly livened up the competition. But the USA have not embraced the same rules on anabolic steroids as Britain, the rest of Europe, or Australia. So are there still some ruffles in the surface of that playing field? The Americans are still free to use anabolic steroids in their horses at home and they are free to race at Royal Ascot provided they have a negative test prior to travelling to Britain. They are not subject to the same rules as British-bred runners and some think it shows.

— Simple —

I N an article entitled ‘Raising the Bar’, Racing Post writers were asked to put forward suggestions on what might be done to improve the Royal meeting. Graham Dench suggested scrapping the requirement for Chesham runners to be by a stallion who had won over a mile and a quarter or more, and upgrading the race to provide a true test for the two-year-old with the stamina to run seven furlongs in June. ‘Surely’, he said, ‘it could only enhance the race if it was open to juveniles by stallions who are influences for stamina, yet for a variety of reasons never won over a mile and a quarter’.

He is absolutely right, of course, but he was not right when he said: ‘The clause requiring Chesham runners to be by a stallion who won over a mile and a quarter or more is pretty much a one-off in the racing programme’. We now have a significant number of maiden and novice races for two-year-olds run with ‘Chesham’ conditions and this, like the reduction in the distance of the Queen’s Vase, is part of the BHA’s programme to promote the breeding and racing of stayers.

It is total nonsense. If they want to promote horses which excel over longer distances, then they should put on more and better races over longer distances. It really is as simple as that.



Mark, helped by Scott Doherty, saddles up Nyaleti, owned by 3 Batterhams and A Reay, for her run in the Chesham Stakes in which she finished second

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