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PRESSING CONCERNS

A GREAT treat for me as a small child was to be allowed to stay up late on a Friday night and go with my dad to Bridgeton Cross in Glasgow where he could get his Saturday Sporting Chronicle at around midnight.

I don't remember ever reading that paper – was it pink or was that another publication altogether? – and I was most surprised to discover that it didn't close until 1983. I graduated that year and when I started my first job, as an assistant vet with Bob Smith in Newtownstewart, Northern Ireland, I began buying The Sporting Life.

I bought 'The Life' every day – or every day that it was published, I don't think it was available on Sundays at that time – until it closed in 1998 although, when the Racing Post appeared in 1986, I started to see the Life as the betting paper and the Post as the racing paper. I used to say that The Sporting Life wasn't designed to be read, it was designed to be posted on bookmakers' walls and there was a lot of truth in that as the form was laid out to continue on the same sheet of paper rather than on the next page.

Nonetheless, I was delighted when I was approached early in 1994 and asked to

write a bi-weekly column in The Life. Looking back, I really enjoyed those years under editor Tom Clarke but I must confess that I was thrilled and flattered when I was one of the few invited to move over to the Post when they merged in 1998. Now, I thought, I will be writing for the industry paper, about the racing industry, for the racing industry. How wrong could I be?

From the day that Sheikh Mohammed passed the Racing Post over to Trinity Mirror group, it was no longer a racing industry paper. My relationship with the editorial staff was tumultuous from the start and we eventually parted ways in 2003 over the paper's 'Campaign For Stable Staff'.

Angered

I thought that series of articles, written by David Ashforth, was an ill-conceived, biased, portrayal of stable staff and their employers which did nothing but harm to the racing industry and I would have been angered if it had appeared in any tabloid, never mind the Racing Post.

Sadly, the paper's attitude to the industry that provides its raison d'être has, if anything, deteriorated since 2003 and last month they stooped to new lows.

On July 7 in his Friday column, Tom Kerr assured us that he has 'no personal desire to see the whip banned'. He told us that he does not believe it is cruel and he does not believe that there is an urgent welfare reason for it to be banned.

Eh? The front page of the paper was dedicated to his column and advertised it under the heading 'Why Racing Must Ban The Whip' on a background of jockeys, with sticks raised, under a black, cloudy, sky.

He quoted Mark Twain who said: 'A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes'. Certainly it can, especially if you dress it up with emotive headlines and photographs and put it on the front page of a newspaper.

He pretends to be a supporter of racing and claims that he wants to see racing flourish. He wants us to believe that he wrote this column to warn us of impending danger if we do not accept his views but only an idiot could believe that this article or, in particular, the front page of the paper it was in, did anything but harm to the sport of horseracing.

I have just a hint of sympathy for him because he refers to this perception of a cruel sport and says that he believes it to be fundamentally wrong. If that is true, then

fields and non-runners but it is surely simple arithmetic. If you keep putting on more races, then you either need more horses or more runs per horse. Frankly, I don't see any evidence that we are going to get either in the foreseeable future.

And we are continually reminded, especially in our trade paper, that there is a stable staff crisis, with the number one grievance being long and unsociable hours. So, what do we do? We put on more races and increase the emphasis on unsociable hours.

Very clever.

he has been used and manipulated by his editor and those who wrote the headlines, to some extent, but my sympathy is short-lived as his writing is dotted with unnecessary emotive embellishments that show his true colours.

He concludes with questions and says, 'I ask only this: what would really happen if the whip was banned as a coercive tool? Would the sport suffer? Would the spectacle be diminished if a thrilling finish was fought not with whips slapping into the flanks of tired horses, but with hands and heels, nothing but man and horse united?'

I'll answer, firstly, with a question of my own. Would the horses be less tired? Or did he just slot that word, tired, in to reinforce the suggestion that there is some abuse involved?

I'd say they might be more tired or, at least, more subject to the effect of fatigue. Three hundred plus years of selective breeding have honed the flight response to a quite incredible degree in the thoroughbred horse, but that flight response still needs to be initiated. Contrary to what some ignorant people

think, and it seems Tom Kerr is one of them, horses will not race for the honour of winning, the trophy, the pat on the neck, or the extra bowl of oats. They simply do not have the means to understand that however much we want to feel that they know when they have won. They do not.

Dogs might be trained to run for a chocolate drop and a fussing from their owner but they would never run as fast as greyhounds in which the natural instinct to chase prey has been selected for. And horses just wouldn't do it at all.

Racing would not be 'just fine' and the thoroughbred breed would steadily

Only an idiot could believe this Post article did anything but harm to the sport of horseracing

diminish. Genetic selection is a harsh process. It is based on the principles of survival. Federico Tesio famously said: "The thoroughbred exists because its selection has depended, not on experts, technicians, or zoologists, but on a piece of wood: the winning post of the Epsom Derby". He perhaps omitted to mention the piece of wood that initiated the flight response and ensured that the horses pushed themselves to their limits.

The word 'coercion', as used by Tom Kerr, is an emotive one in this context but let's be realistic about it, horses will not

run their hearts out for reward. Don't listen to people who tell you nothing would change. They, quite simply, don't know what they are talking about.

And just three days after this article appeared, while racing was still reeling from the blow to its public profile, Lee Mottershead wrote that apprentice jockeys were another group being abused and exploited by the demon horse trainers.

Another attempt to gain populist favour by portraying the racing industry in a poor light and, once again, poorly researched and lacking in substance. As a result, Richard Hannon and Andrew Balding, two

of the most successful mentors of young riders in recent years, said that they will not take on apprentices in future.

If that is the case then, of course, the main losers will be the apprentice jockeys who will struggle to get started without the backing of

trainers. Surely, it would be better for Richard Hannon, Andrew Balding and others to vent their anger and frustration on the Racing Post.

I THINK we need to ask ourselves if the time has come for racing to drop the Racing Post? If the public perception of the sport is really so crucial to its future – and I agree that it is – how long can we continue to ally ourselves to a newspaper that regularly presents a negative opinion of the sport and the industry behind it?

More, more, more . . .

MORE racing than ever before. A record number of fixtures in 2018. That must be good news, surely?

More opportunities for owners, trainers and jockeys to win a race. Most races to be run for a minimum total value of £6,000. More media money for racecourses. More betting opportunities. More pool money and

racing expenses for stable staff. What is there not to be happy about?

Well, maybe the fact that there is no sign of more horses in training to run in these races and there is no great influx of people desperate to take horses to the races in the evening and at weekends.

The racecourses, and the betting industry, are continually complaining about small

Funding misses target

THE new, bigger than ever, fixture list does, at least, come with a £9.7m funding boost which is to be targeted at racing's 'grassroots'.

What are racing's 'grassroots'?

When I think of grassroots, I think of new beginnings. In racing terms that would be young horses and, maybe, people: stars of the future.

But I have a horrible feeling that that isn't where the BHA are going to be targeting this £9.7m. I fear that, as with Jockey Club Racecourses' grassroots series, they

could be talking about low-grade handicappers.

If so, it might just have the effect of increasing the average number of runs per horse, to help fill all the extra races, as this is surely a group of horses that could run more often if there was incentive to do so. But injecting money, and more races, at the lowest level must ultimately lead to a further dumbing down of British racing and a reduction in the average rating in Britain.

We're already some way down that slippery slope and I don't think they should be pouring any oil on it.

Blindingly obvious

WHEN a horse, Just Marlon, died as a result of injuries sustained when running loose at Yarmouth with a blindfold on, I said what a rare occurrence it was, but not so rare that I had not taken measures to ensure that it will not happen at Kingsley Park.

However, it was only a little more than two weeks before we saw another incident on a racecourse of a horse leaving the stalls with the blindfold still on. This time, thankfully, the experienced Tom Eaves was able to remove the blindfold and pull the horse up before it came to any harm but it was still a reminder of how dangerous it is to have blindfolds on horses.

Here we use a blindfold with a safety cord attached to a Velcro wrist band which is put on the rider before the blindfold is put on the horse. If the rider and horse part company, then the blindfold comes off. Once in the stalls, the rider removes the Velcro band and fastens it to the superstructure of the stalls. Now, if for any reason the rider should fail to pull the blindfold off when the horse jumps, it will be left attached to the stalls.

I showed my contraption to one of the BHA starters who, although he said that he was trying not to be negative, didn't seem too impressed. He was particularly concerned that, with horses which are loaded late with a blindfold on, there would not be time for the rider to get the wristband off and onto the stalls.

I couldn't really argue with that as we never look to open the stalls that quickly when practising at home but I hadn't



The blindfold is fastened to the frame of the stalls

long left the races that day before the answer occurred to me. If the horse is going in last, or even late, then the wristband can be worn by the stalls handler – the pusher – and held or attached to the stalls before the horse jumps.

We already do this at home as we often train horses to be led and pushed with the blindfold, but no rider, in place. And we first used this system for putting horses into the swimming pool and they, of course, don't have a rider on them. We have been using a blindfold with safety cord for this purpose for nearly 30 years.

This system also has the added advantage that a horse can be loaded in the stalls with a blindfold but without the rider on – something which is not allowed on racecourses at present.

The BHA surely needs to take my suggestion seriously before another accident happens.

Concerted efforts

I CALLED in at Newmarket last Friday evening, on my way home from Ascot, to saddle Noble Manners. It seemed very quiet for a summer meeting on the July course. I left soon after my 7.10 race and learned the next day that Texas had played to a sell-out crowd.

Clearly, any suggestion that these concerts are bringing new people to racing is, at least, greatly exaggerated. The majority don't come until the racing is over.

Why should they? The act they came to see isn't on until after the racing. Most probably wouldn't turn up to see the support act wherever the concert was held.

The answer, to my mind, is fairly simple. If racecourses are going to aim to combine racing and concerts, they must do exactly that – combine them. The performers should be involved in the racing, with races named after them, trophies to present, and best turned out prizes to judge. Maybe then, if their fans see that they are taking an interest in the racing, then they may do too. So long as the music fans know that the performers will only show after the racing is over, they will do the same.

If this cannot be done, for whatever reason, then the answer to that is simple as well – don't put the concert on or run it on a separate day. As things stand concerts are of no benefit to racing apart from boosting the coffers of the racecourses. I'm sure far more regular racegoers are lost by running concerts than are gained. Racing's real fans are sick of them.

OWNERS GROUP

THIS MONTH we are launching our new Kingsley Park partnerships for 2018 and, to coincide with this, the Kingsley Park Owners Group.

All those with a horse in training at Kingsley Park, or a share in one of the Kingsley Park Partnerships, will automatically be given membership of the Owners Group. The Owners Group will run several horses, leased from Mark Johnston Racing Limited on a no-cost, no-earnings basis for the pleasure and interest of its members.

Members will be able to attend meetings as owners when the group has a runner and badges will be allocated on request or by ballot where necessary. The group will subscribe to the Weatherbys text message service for any member that wants to be kept informed of all entries and declarations for Owners Group horses.



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