

Off the bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

YOU may recall that I started off last month's column by looking at the viewing figures achieved by ITV Racing for their coverage of this year's Cheltenham Festival. I expressed disappointment at the figures by comparison with ITV's figures for their 2017 coverage, and with earlier viewing figures dating back to Channel 4's period as the favoured terrestrial broadcaster. I also bemoaned the concession that so much of ITV's coverage of the sport would be transmitted on ITV4.

ITV Racing presenter Ed Chamberlin saw the article and wrote the following letter to the Klarion in response:

"I very much respect and enjoy reading John Scanlon's column in the excellent Kingsley Klarion. However, I would appreciate it if you could pass on a couple of points.

"1. He is correct to say it was slightly disappointing to have a 4% drop from what was a huge figure for the 2017 Cheltenham Gold Cup on ITV. To say "ITV are failing to reach a new audience" is a little harsh as that number (1.63m) is still 29% up on the 2016 figure. The Wednesday was up nearly 50%. Is that not still a big uplift?"

"2. Further, ITV4's figures for 2018 have been really good, including from a first visit to Kelso on Saturday, and frequently beating the equivalent on C4. The Opening Show hasn't reached those figures yet but is getting there. It's a long journey.

"3. The 'Social Stable' was never going to be to everyone's taste. However, we need to innovate, broaden racing's appeal, get youngsters interested in racing and people around the country talking about the great game. The best way to do that in the modern age is via Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc. so that must be integrated in our show.

"The Social Stable also allows us to engage with

WRITING in his informative and entertaining 'Wednesday Column' in the Racing Post on April 25, Julian Muscat turned his attention to a question which comes into focus every year at the start of the turf season: racecourse gallop or a trial? While stating his view that the trials at the Craven meeting would have been greatly enhanced had the likes of Elarqam, Rajasinghe, Veracious and Wild Illusion contested them, rather than having gallops, he concedes that that's not the same as saying the trials would have been beneficial for the horses concerned. "That's a call better left to their trainers," he concludes.

Muscat goes on to rehearse the preferences of a number of trainers in deciding whether to send a Guineas candidate straight to Newmarket or to opt for a gallop. For instance, he points out that Richard Spencer, in deciding to gallop Rajasinghe, is mirroring the decision made by his former boss, Barry Hills, in galloping Ghanaati on the Rowley Mile before her Guineas win in 2009. He notes that we have become "accustomed to seeing Aidan O'Brien's leading lights head straight for Newmarket", while Gosden and Fabre "favour taking in trials."

racegoers at the track and answer people's questions about the sport, which to a lot of people remains a foreign language."

I thank Ed for taking the trouble to respond and, in truth, wouldn't want to argue over the detail of what he says at points 1, 2 and 4 of his letter. As I said last month, aspects of the ITV coverage are excellent; my frustration with the viewing figures is that I had every hope that when ITV, one of the two main channels in British broadcasting, took over from C4 there would be a quantum leap forward for televised racing and the audience it might attract. As Ed suggests, it may be a long journey and I very much hope he is correct in that assertion.

I'm not wholly in agreement with Ed regarding the use of social media and the innovation of the 'Social Stable'. As with most things in life quality counts; simply using modern media platforms is not enough. There is a need to ensure that the quality which is so evident in some aspects of ITV's coverage of racing also extends to this aspect of their work.

It's important for everyone involved in British racing that ITV succeed in attracting new people to the sport and by broadening racing's appeal. The peak audience viewing figure for the 2018 Grand National rose from 8.2m in 2017 to 8.5m this year. On the face of it, a rise of 300,000 is to be welcomed, but the 2015/2016 C4 figures were 8.8m and 10m respectively. John Baker, Aintree's managing director, is on record as commenting, when the contract was awarded to ITV, that Grand National viewing figures of 12m would be 'at the lower end of expectations.'

There is clearly still work to be done in promoting televised racing, but it's good to know that Ed is passionate about the cause.

For me, two factors need stressing. Firstly, a top-class racehorse these days has a calendar which extends far beyond the British Classics. A Guineas winner might be asked to race at the highest level at Newmarket, followed by the Irish Guineas or perhaps the Dante, followed by the Derby meeting, Royal Ascot, perhaps the King George meeting at Ascot or a break until York. If still going strong, perhaps the St Leger at Doncaster will beckon for a suitable candidate, or a trip to Paris at the start of October. Later that month, Champions Day looms into view as a valuable target.

If we have a superstar on our hands, we also have to think Breeder's Cup, Hong Kong or Japan. Where, on earth, does a run in the Craven, Nell Gwyn or European Free Handicap figure in such an ambitious project? Opinion is clearly divided; Frankel took in a trial, while Sea The Stars didn't.

Secondly, Julian Muscat refers to the trainers being the persons best placed to make the call. I would have been happier if he had replaced the word 'trainers' with 'connections'. After all, it is the duty of a trainer to race the horses in his care in the best interests of their owners. As is often overlooked, without owners paying the bills there would be no racing.



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