



mark@markjohnstonracing.com

Smoothing out the troughs

LAST month, after 35 winners at a strike rate of 19%, I briefly discussed the concept of trainer or yard form and I referred you back to January when, for very different reasons, I had discussed the concept in much greater detail. The conclusion, so far, has been that there is no real reason to link the peaks and troughs of individual horses' form because they live in the same yard or, even more unlikely, because they are trained by the same person but live in different yards.

However, after a quite remarkable July in which we have had 47 winners at a strike rate of 22%, I myself find it hard to believe that there aren't factors affecting the whole team at once.

Patterns

I put it to the statisticians, James Willoughby and Jason Hathorn, and they are still adamant that yard form does not exist, although they do believe that particular trainers follow cyclical patterns of form that are repeated year on year. That makes me wonder whether there are any factors, within our control, affecting that cycle which we can use to smooth out the troughs while retaining the peaks, although I fully accept that the biggest influences most certainly are out of our control e.g. the handicap system, the race programme, etc., etc..

When other trainers fall into a trough, as they all do from time to time, most call for the vets and it is, perhaps, the biggest advantage of my having had that veterinary background that I soon realised that vets wouldn't have the answer. In the early days of my training career, many trainers used the 'virus' to explain cases of poor performance and it was not at all uncommon for yards to shut down for weeks on end because their team had been struck down by the 'virus'. I knew that, short of an exotic disease or infection with a very virulent bacteria or virus that the horses had never encountered before and had no immunity to, the whole team was never going to be affected at once. It is my job, as with every other trainer, to distinguish those who are fit and well from those who are not and run them. Contrary to popular belief, being a vet doesn't actually make me any better at doing that but it does, perhaps, give me the confidence to believe the evidence of my own eyes rather than embark on an exhaustive investigation to find a problem that isn't there.

I have believed from an early stage that most cases of poor performance, when they actually exist (many runs are labelled as a poor performance, even by the stewards, when the finishing position did not meet the owners', trainers' or punters' expectations), do not have a physical aetiology. That is why, if the horse is well and the owner will allow, I run it again, after allowing appropriate time for changes in handicap rating or conditions.

As a result, our horses have earned a collective reputation for toughness, for an ability to run more often than others, and for the ability to bounce back from a poor run.

Nonetheless, I will continue to look for controllable factors that may influence the performance of the team as a whole. I will not, however, be looking to virology, bacteriology or haematology for the answers.

HAPPY AND GLORIOUS

GOODWOOD was, as is invariably the case, glorious. The weather at the beginning of the week was rather unsettled, but it was never bad enough to dampen spirits or challenge the facilities and the ground, although just on the slow side to begin with, was as near to perfect as anyone could ask for at a five-day meeting.

In terms of turf management, and in many other areas, Goodwood sets the standard that the rest of the industry must aspire to and I found it surprising that there were so many non-runners, supposedly due to the ground when it was predominantly Good throughout the week and never firmer than Good-Firm in places. The rules of racing, as they stand, and the quite ridiculous number of alternative races for horses at all levels, dictate that we trainers will sometimes use ground as a reason to withdraw horses when there are, in reality, other influences but it is surely time that we looked at the way we describe and

measure the going.

If Good-Firm is the optimum going for flat racing, why do we call it 'Good to Firm' and place it at one end of the going spectrum? To an outsider it wouldn't seem like a logical name for the optimum conditions and, clearly, many professionals are also influenced by this misnomer. We also should introduce official corrections to going which should be independently produced (i.e. not by the Clerk of the Course) and there should be some sanction on those courses which most commonly get it wrong. I would be confident that the descriptions at Goodwood would be as accurate as any in the country.

On the track, it was a successful, if slightly frustrating, week for us. Races are all very competitive at meetings such as Goodwood and three winners is satisfactory even with the number of runners involved and, although frustrating, there was a lot of positives to be taken from our five seconds. We had a few hard luck stories but, on a track like Goodwood,

that is the nature of the game and there will be some who finished behind us with their own stories to tell.

MUCH has been made of the new sponsorship at the meeting, and rightly so, with total prize-money on offer topping £4.7 million. A large proportion of that has come from the principal sponsor, Qatar, and all in the sport should be very grateful to them for their contribution but, as is so often the case in this industry, it is worth considering what the owners are putting in to keep this show on the road.

Most races in Britain have an entry fee of 0.5% of the total prize-money but at Goodwood many races have entry fees that are up to 50% more (i.e. 0.75%) than that generally accepted norm. As a result, at this year's Glorious Goodwood meeting, owners paid £1,057,975 in entry fees. More than 22% of the total prize-money on offer.

Forty-seven winners in the month astonished many people, including me, but, apart from the usual references to yard form, didn't seem to catch the imagination of the media at all. Has it been done before, on the Flat, in Britain? I doubt if it has, but the lack of interest in this age of media hype and Great British Racing, makes me think that it must be reasonably common.

I often feel that the electronic age and all the gadgets that come with it are the bane of my life. I wonder does it save time at all. It certainly makes us all rather antisocial but, for many of us working in the racing industry, it has become expected of us to be continually available on the phone and/or by e-mail.

I, therefore, had the greatest of sympathy for Bruce Raymond when I saw him in the paddock at the Newmarket July meeting, shaking his device and saying, "They can get pictures from Pluto, why can't I get a signal on my phone?"

AS WE STOOD in the parade ring prior to the Qatar Vintage Stakes, Richard Fahey asked me, jokingly: 'Did they run out of Qatari jackets, Mark?'. He was referring to the fact that our staff were wearing their usual MJR tartan waistcoats and not the jackets that had been handed out by the race sponsor.

Branding

This was not some act of protest on my part and was certainly not any reflection on my feelings for the sponsor of the race. We were simply abiding by BHA rules which require staff to wear clothing carrying the

Tartan rules at the course



branding of the registered sponsor and no other branding. MJR pay £900 per horse per annum to owners for the right to carry our logo on the staff clothing and paddock sheet. We leave the branding sites on the colours to the owner if they wish to use or sell them, the racecourse own the site on the number cloth and often sell it to the race sponsor, and the jockeys sell sites on their breeches to other sponsors.

Sponsors

The BHA police these sponsorship regulations fairly severely and are quick to reprimand, and even fine, trainers for any discrepancies but they appear often to turn a blind eye to race sponsors handing out paddock jackets to staff.

Staff, understandably, get very confused by it and are unsure as to whether they are required to wear these jackets or not. It is time that the practice was stopped and the rules on branding and advertising were applied equally to all.

