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Enhancing performance?

An interesting article by Howard Wright in this month's issue of Thoroughbred Owner & Breeder made me think again about the widespread use of Lasix in US racing. I was not aware, until reading Howard's piece, that three Kenyan athletes have been banned for using Furosemide (Lasix), and it was this and the fact that Howard said the drug had been 'firmly labelled as performance-enhancing' which drew my attention.

I had not seen anything in the press on the Kenyan athletes – which is hardly surprising when you consider that the only newspapers we get are three copies of the Racing Post – and my Google search may not have been thorough enough to uncover the material that Howard had access to, but I still can't find any scientific evidence that this drug directly enhances performance.

Furosemide is a powerful loop diuretic, which means that it blocks the absorption of electrolytes and so, through osmosis in

the kidney, increases urine production. It is very effective at treating oedema (excessive build-up of fluid in tissue) and hypertension (increased blood pressure), and it is known to reduce the incidence of exercise-induced pulmonary haemorrhage in racehorses, although its mode of action in doing so remains something of a mystery.

It is, apparently, used by human athletes to help them reduce weight to meet weight

Lasix use has to stop if we want a level playing field

limits in some sports (presumably jockeys and boxers) but, principally, as a masking agent as its diuretic effect can make the detection of some drugs in urine much more difficult. I couldn't find any evidence of a performance-enhancing effect in human athletes and, for every possible positive effect that I could think of myself, I could think of several others that were

likely to be detrimental to performance.

In horses the situation is different because, as a herbivore which depends on fermentation in the gut for a significant part of its digestion process, a much greater proportion of its body fluid is held in the gut. Lasix can remove a very significant amount of this fluid (10kg or more) and I can quite imagine that that weight reduction could be performance-enhancing in itself. However, the resultant dehydration, reduced blood volume, and loss of electrolytes must have the potential for an equal or greater detrimental effect on performance.

Unlike Howard Wright and, it would seem, the vast majority of US horsemen, I am not convinced by the anecdotal evidence which says that Lasix enhances performance. Nor would I be swayed by an owner-breeder, Russell Cohen, telling the press that 'Lasix is a stone-cold performance-enhancer' or the fact that his horse, Effinex, has won more than 95% of

its prize-money when raced on Lasix.

It is impossible to make any objective assessment of the effects of Lasix on performance while the vast majority of US horses are on it, but I would argue that there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that it is not, on its own (remember its ability to mask other drugs), a performance-enhancer.

Knowledge

As Howard says, a significant number of Europeans have adopted a 'when in Rome' attitude to the use of Lasix and other drugs when racing in the US and, until 2009, I was one of them. However, the knowledge that running Jukebox Jury on Lasix would prevent him from standing as a stallion in Germany led to my running him in the 2009 Canadian International without the drug. I was amazed to see that only two horses on the entire card ran without Lasix and the other was Mick Channon's filly Lahaleeb. Jukebox finished second in the Canadian International and Lahaleeb won the E P Taylor.

It seems to be widely, and to my mind wrongly, assumed that if human athletes are using drugs in an attempt to enhance performance, there will be strong scientific evidence to support their efficacy. It strikes me that the modern-day alchemists

behind doping in sport are hardly any better than their medieval counterparts, but they have no difficulty in finding customers for their potions and ideas.

Whenever we get on to the subject of drugs in racing I cannot help but recall the words of the Australian trainer, Peter

If any reader can point me in the direction of reliable scientific evidence that Lasix has a direct performance-enhancing effect, in horses or humans, I would be very interested. It would be a great topic for further debate in the Kingsley Klarion.

Similarly, I would be interested to hear the theory behind cobalt as a performance-enhancer. I understand the role of cobalt as an essential element in erythropoiesis (red blood cell production) and so I can see that cobalt deficiency might result in anaemia, but I can't quite see why excess cobalt would, in itself, trigger increased cell production. And, even if someone can demonstrate that that is the case, I might take further convincing that increased red cell production enhances performance in the racehorse.

Moody, who once said "if someone like Mark Johnston wants to train like they did 200 years ago, then good luck to him. You've got to look at every advantage within the rules of racing to get to the highest level. Obviously he doesn't have a vet in his yard."

Moody is currently facing doping charges in Australia after samples taken from one of his horses were found to contain more than twice the permissible levels of cobalt. Cobalt is a chemical element which has been used as a performance-enhancer in human athletics, despite dubious science behind its mode of action, and which has now apparently found its way into horse racing, where any beneficial effect is even more unlikely.

Ultimately, as I said back in 2008 when I incurred the wrath of Peter Moody, we are seeking a level playing field in all international racing and, if we are to get there, Lasix use has to stop, regardless of any debate on the pros and cons of its use on individuals. In this I wholeheartedly agree with Howard Wright and I think his suggestion, that Pattern races which are afforded that status by the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities should be drug-free, would be a step in the right direction.

Attending to detail

SIR MARK PRESCOTT often says that "it is a racehorse's main aim in life to kill itself, and it should be our main aim to try and stop it from doing so".

I pretty much agree with him and long before I began my life as a trainer I started to learn about horse behaviour and husbandry and to think about the best ways to house them, keep them healthy and safe, and train them.

Now, looking back over the last 28 years as a trainer, I think I have probably derived as much satisfaction from developing our yards and training facilities as I have from the winners that I have trained. It has almost become something of a hobby. I like to look at every detail, from the mangers and drinking bowls to the vehicles they travel in and the gallops they work on, and think how they might be improved.

There have been breakthroughs along the way and new ideas

that have brought significant benefits to our horses and staff but, as in all walks of life, I have often had to learn from mistakes that I have made or that I was lucky enough to see someone else make first.

Sadly, some horses have killed themselves – thankfully, very few – and, when that has happened, I have had to see what I could learn from it and what, if anything, I could do to reduce the chances of it happening again.

So, when I received a letter from Klarion reader Jonathan Byrne asking about the construction of lunge rings, I thought it could make a good feature for future editions of the Klarion to tell you in detail about some of the facilities we have and how they have evolved, particularly with regard to the safety of our horses.

But I'll deal with Jonathan's queries first. He asked how our lunge rings were constructed, as he plans to make one for his daughter, and wondered if they were just made of wood chips spread on the ground. We have four open rings at Kingsley Park of varying sizes. Three have a Fibresand surface over a stone base and Terram membrane and the latest, and best, has a Polytrack surface on a porous Tarmac base. We also have five covered rings



Yearlings being lunged at Kingsley Park

with metal roofs and solid walls made from railway sleepers. These double as lunge rings and turn-out facilities and are extremely useful.

It is worth noting that we only lunge horses as part of the breaking process and so, depending on how many horses Jonathan's daughter has, and what other facilities she has, it might be debateable whether she needs a lunge ring at all. When we started at Bank End Stables in North Somercotes, we lunged on a

flat area of grass and we continued to do that for many years on Middleham Moor.

However, as with any other exercising of horses on turf, if you are going to do it repeatedly in the same place and/or in all weathers, turf soon turns to mud. Putting wood chips or any other absorbent material on top of the turf is a very temporary solution and will soon result in even deeper mud, although I have seen people lunge on top of a straw muck heap. That requires the straw to be changed regularly

and, if you want a permanent solution, you need either a roof or a truly all-weather surface.

Next month the Klarion will begin a series looking in detail at the various facilities we provide here at Kingsley Park, such as the gallops, the walkers, the boxes and the equine pool. We will begin, thanks to Mr Byrne, with the lunge rings, looking at how they have evolved to the level of today, how they are maintained, and other factors such as the avoidance of injuries from lunging.

