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Lasix: Magic potion?

Last month I wrote about the widespread use of Lasix in US racing and the recent high-profile cases in Australia where cobalt is thought to have been used in the belief that it is a performance-enhancer.

I invited readers to point me in the direction of any reliable scientific evidence that Lasix has a direct performance-enhancing effect and/or to tell me the theory behind cobalt as a means of making horses, or humans, run faster.

Simon Whybrow, in his letter to Kingsley Kickback this month (p.6), suggests that the 'fact' that Lasix stops bleeding from the lungs makes it a performance-enhancer and Alasdair Ross gave us some interesting stuff on a 'Speed-Sustaining Elixir' and the water of life, but neither could be construed as scientific evidence.

However, when an email arrived from Professor Tim Morris, former BHA director of equine science and welfare, with three attachments and a link to a website, I thought all the bombshells had landed. I expected to have my ignorance exposed and feared that the words of that Australian trainer who said that I train as they did 200 years ago and that I need a good vet, were about to come back and haunt me.

Thankfully, that was not the case and I will not be rushing out to try and poach a coach from the Kenyan athletics team or employ a pharmacologist.

My January piece was prompted by the news that three Kenyan athletes had been banned for using Lasix (furosemide) and I touched on the fact that many horsemen seem to assume that, if human athletes are using a particular drug, their decision will be backed by sound science and that, if it's

good for a track and field athlete, it must be good for a racehorse. I inferred that both ideas were seriously flawed and it seems that I wasn't far wrong.

Only one of the papers which I received from Professor Morris was on the use of furosemide but it referred to several studies in human athletes, and it seems that in human runners furosemide was found to reduce performance in races of 1,500m or more. There have been no studies in sprinters.

So why were the Kenyan athletes taking it? Ignorance? That is not impossible, there is a lot of it about, but my guess is that they were more interested in its ability to mask other drugs and the same has often been said of its use in US horseracing.

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The paper does refer to studies which found improved track times in thoroughbreds and treadmill performance in standardbred horses, but this could be directly linked to a reduction in bleeding in the thoroughbreds and to a reduction in body weight in the standardbreds. To me, neither would constitute a direct performance-enhancing effect.

A paper on 'Cobalt and the horse' by a very eminent Australian professor of veterinary pharmacology does state that 'a study demonstrated that cobalt chloride increased energy systems and overall physical performance in rats by preconditioning hypoxia' and stated that 'cobalt in supra-physiological levels has been shown to enhance performance in humans and rats'. But the author then stated that 'cobalt would also be expected to enhance performance in

horses since similar physiology exists in most mammalian species'.

That last statement surprised me a little as, while the physiology may be similar in most mammals, it is not the same. I would question whether the oxygen-carrying capacity of the circulatory system is as much of a limiting factor in the process of delivering oxygen to muscles in a racehorse as it is in a rat or a human. We know that the circulatory system in the horse is highly adapted for flight and, even if supra-physiological levels of cobalt can increase production of red blood cells, it may not have the same effect on performance.

It is perhaps brave and/or stupid of me to dare question the conclusions of such an accomplished academic but I was emboldened by one of the other papers which I had been given to read. In an article for the Veterinary Journal, Ali Mobasher and Christopher Proudman state that 'currently there

is no evidence to suggest that cobalt chloride can enhance human or equine performance'. This is not a peer-reviewed paper but it does draw material from, and make reference to, numerous studies which would suggest that the rationale for using cobalt as a performance-enhancer is ill-conceived, at best.

EDUCATION, especially in science, brings a realisation about how little you know and my brief veterinary education and time in practice has left me very aware of my ignorance on many subjects but it has taught me to question perceived wisdom. In the case of drug use in racing, I am for ever questioning the latest fashions, trends and potions, but I am no nearer to believing in a speed-enhancing elixir.

FOR many years I liked to point out that horseracing was the only professional sport where the losers don't get paid. To be honest, I wasn't absolutely sure if I was right, as I didn't know what happened in all sports, but I was trying to make a point. A losing football team still gets paid, and paid handsomely. There is a realisation in most sports that the participants must be paid and it is ultimately the end-user, the spectator, sponsor, or punter, who must pay. That isn't the case in horseracing, where the owners invariably lose money and the owners of losers get little or no return.

I was calling for all participants to get paid, for appearance money, and a few years ago I would have hailed Chester's latest initiative, to give every runner a minimum of £400, as a great breakthrough. Now, having watched numerous other attempts at appearance money schemes in practice, I am not so sure.

Prize-money

Don't get me wrong, I fully appreciate Chester's attempt to give more back and it is not lost on me that Chester is already the best track in Britain in terms of prize-money and owner experience. I have long said that only Chester's and Musselburgh's executive really believe that more prize-money converts to more and better runners – although it has to be said that Chelmsford are also making a pretty good fist of it.

Sadly, however, previous appearance money schemes of this type, including some tried at Hamilton where I am a board member and we desperately wanted to increase the field size in some of our better races, have not yielded the simple result that

I have seen several comments in the press about Ascot's £1million increase in prize-money which state that this only benefits racing's richest owners. Not so.

There are strong arguments to say that any increase in prize-money benefits everyone in the sport as owners rarely take anything away from this industry and all inputs channelled through owners filter through to all concerned. But even if you take the simplistic view and look only at the payment of prize-money on the day for winning these specific races, the money goes to the owner of the best horse. It is not means-tested and it is not dependent on the cost or value of the animal. Is that not what sport, including horseracing, is all about?

Attitude

We have seen plenty of 'rags to riches' stories at Ascot in recent years and I think that is what most owners, rich and less rich (poor people can't afford to own racehorses), are in it for. We see that by their attitude to the big, lottery-style, early-closing races where the chance of winning is remote and the prize fund is largely built on owners' own money. Still they enter in their droves.

Of course, those who 'invest' most in horse racing and horses will take most out but that is not proportionate to what

we had hoped for. Unfortunately, some owners and/or their trainers were attracted to run horses with little hope of winning and, dare I say, in some cases no intention of trying to do so. We saw horses rated in the 40s and 50s running in Listed and Conditions races and some ran around detached from the field.

This might not happen at Chester – I dearly hope it doesn't – but I fear it will and at Chester there are further complications. Over some race distances on the Roodee it is known that horses drawn wide have little or no chance of winning and there has been a tendency for some horses with such a draw to become non-runners. Lee Mottershead, writing in the Racing Post, and others think that the appearance money scheme will alleviate this problem, but I fear the potential for a competitive horse to be pushed out into a draw which removes all chance by horses on its inner who are there just to collect £400. That would be a tragedy. Personally, I don't think we should be running races where some participants cannot win because of their draw and I think the maximum field should be cut in those races, but that is another issue.

Experience of previous schemes tells me that we are far better to pay graduated prize-money down to the desired minimum number of runners (usually eight), as the BHA did in their scheme last year. That way there is an incentive for most, if not all, horses to be ridden to achieve their best possible position.

A closer look now at some other professional sports revealed that this is the situation in golf where a large number of participants get paid, but there is always the risk of failing to make the cut and going home empty-handed.

they put in. We all know that money can't guarantee you winners and paying significantly more for a horse gives only a tiny increase in chance of success.

Well done Ascot. You didn't get the credit you deserve for your efforts to keep British Racing near the top of the sport in international terms, which helps attract foreign investment to keep our industry, and all those who depend on it, afloat.

Are we going to get a summary of 2015 flat statistics from the Racing Post? Sadly, as we are now into February, it doesn't look like it. I have always thoroughly enjoyed poring through the stats but it seems that this service from the Racing Post is another victim of British Racing messing around with the seasons in an attempt to make the sport 'more interesting'.

The Racing Post did produce a pull-out with statistics for the 2015 flat racing 'season' although I think it has different dates for jockeys and trainers and that has never been a substitute for me. It doesn't allow comparison with previous years and, above all, it is flawed because it has a crossover of generations with two-year-olds in the first two months of the season becoming three-year-olds.

Some statistics are available elsewhere but not in the format of the Racing Post summary which I enjoyed so much.