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## No explanation required

**I**T seems that in racing, more than any other sport, we have come to a position where the public believe that information about the well-being of the participants and/or 'inside information' on how they are likely to perform is at least as important as their recent form. It is a very unhealthy state to be in.

Can you imagine a situation where a football manager or coach were asked if one of the players was going to score in a game, or how many goals in total the team would score? It would be ridiculous to ask such questions, and if they were answered it would immediately put the game under suspicion as to whether it was fixed, but no more ridiculous than the daily barrage I get from punters on course who ask, 'will it win?'. And hardly more ridiculous are those questions we get on an almost daily basis from Racing Post journalists who want 'a line' on our runners.

### Journalists

So how have we got ourselves into this mess? Of course, the media are partly to blame and there is a new breed of lazy scribes who would rather print opinion from trainers as if it were fact than put the effort into studying the form themselves. But the journalists, along with the public at large, were encouraged to believe in the



Byres Road with Joe Fanning up

value of inside information by the very authorities who manage and police the sport.

The BHA are just as likely as the Racing Post to publish misinformation and opinion as if it were fact and are even more likely than the media to misquote trainers, put words into jockeys' mouths, or simply invent the 'facts'.

I have long complained about the BHA instructions requiring trainers to give an explanation for perceived poor performances. Not only is the ruling wrong in principle but the way it is enforced and managed by stipendiary stewards and

stewards' secretaries is appalling.

Surely, before you can give an explanation for a poor performance, you must first establish that it is a poor performance and not the horse's true form. That isn't always easy to do and I would argue that, more often than not, the form is correct and shouldn't be excused. It is virtually impossible to convince the authorities of this and, if they don't like what you tell them, they will simply say that 'the trainer could offer no explanation for the horse's performance'.

A classic example of this occurred when Byres Road ran at Doncaster and finished

last of five behind our own Soldier in Action and Juste Pour Nous, beaten 44 lengths. I did not believe this was a 'poor performance' and thought it was, quite simply, the horse's true form – if form on heavy ground (officially described as 'Soft' but the race was run 13.25 seconds slow and times on the day ranged from 8.26 seconds slow over 6 furlongs to 14.5 seconds slow over a mile and a half) can ever be considered to be true.

When the stipendiary steward enquired about what he and/or the stewards considered to be

a poor performance, I told him that I have long been telling the handicappers that it is almost impossible for horses given a rating of 80 or more for performances on the All-Weather to carry that rating over to the turf and I use early-season races at Doncaster as the example every time.

The race at Doncaster was a 0-95 handicap but, as it turned out, the top weight had a rating of only 84. Nonetheless, Byres Road was the only horse not to have run previously on turf. He gained his rating of 80 after running in two Maiden Auction races and a Maiden on the All-Weather. That is not to say that I believe he will be any less effective on turf but the Doncaster race was many classes above anything he had contested before.

He ran well up to a point, leading for almost seven furlongs, but was the first horse beaten and, after that, his finishing position, in heavy ground, was irrelevant. I

told the stipendiary steward all this but it was published on the BHA website that 'the Stewards considered the running of Byres Road, ridden by Franny Norton and trained by Mark Johnston, which finished unplaced. They noted the trainer could offer no explanation for the colt's performance.'

**The stewards are misleading the public and harming the reputation of our sport**

Not true. I did offer an explanation but he chose to ignore it and what the public got was neither fact nor my opinion.

As it happens, Byres Road came out 11 days later and finished second, beaten 3/4 of a length at Ripon in heavy ground. So I was wrong? Well, yes and no. The handicapper, as is so often the case, certainly wasn't as far out as I had thought and was clearly right to ignore the Doncaster performance. But that does not mean that the horse was suffering from some physical ailment at Doncaster, had put in a poor performance, and had made a miraculous recovery by the time Ripon came around.

Most form students will, understandably, jump to the fact that the Doncaster race was more than two furlongs further than Ripon but, interestingly, Byres Road was headed and beaten more than two furlongs out at Doncaster but was apparently

struggling early in the race at Ripon and was running on very strongly at the finish.

So, what, with the huge benefit of hindsight, is the explanation? For a start, form on very soft ground is notoriously unreliable, distances are greatly extended, and finishing positions of horses which are the first to throw down the gauntlet and get beaten are irrelevant. These were different races, run at a different pace, and Byres Road didn't get involved until near the finish at Ripon.

The one thing we know for sure is that the official 'explanation' given for Doncaster was not the one I gave. The stewards are misleading the public and, in doing so, are doing more harm than good to the reputation of our sport.

## SEEING SENSE

Logic has prevailed at last, at least in some quarters. The National Trainers Federation have stepped in and decreed that the Flat trainers' championship will revert to the calendar year.

The Racing Post expressed their displeasure at the change being made five months after the championship had begun and pointed out that this caused some issues for punters and bookmakers who were already betting on the outcome.

What they don't realise is that the trainers' federation's decision came amid calls from Great British Racing to move the end of the 2016 championship to October and finish on Qipco Champions Day. Thankfully, the NTF stepped in to take control and hopefully this will be the last time that we get a mid-season change.

My antipathy towards equine charity centres (see my recent Straight Talking columns) stemmed not just from my belief that they were totally unnecessary, but from the fact that I saw the founders of the original centres as seeking to promote thoroughbred horses, and racehorses in particular, as charity cases for their own ends. I felt that the very word 'rehabilitation' suggested that racehorses were damaged in some way by having been trained and raced.

Coinciding with the growth in equine charities and centres focussing on racehorses there have been a number of changes in regulations affecting the

horse meat trade and together they have forced the base price of horses down to a point where there now is some danger of them falling into a poverty trap. It is now more likely for horses to be available to those who simply cannot afford to care for them properly.

### Professional

I would have had an altogether different approach to the welfare of ex-racehorses and would have concentrated on promotion to raise the value of thoroughbred horses for all equestrian pursuits. If we can make them more sought after, we not only raise

them out of the potential poverty trap but we place more into professional and/or knowledgeable ownership where they are likely to be well cared for.

Retraining of Racehorses (RoR) has done a lot to promote the use of racehorses in equestrian sports but they have focussed very heavily on the bottom end of the market with classes for retired racehorses pitched at the lowest level where most riders are amateur, inexperienced, and less capable of schooling the horses. I am afraid that, while RoR might have increased demand for ex-racehorses, they have perpetuated the belief that they can be obtained

cheaply, or for free, and that they are somehow horses which are surplus to requirements.

I would be focussing on significant bonuses or premiums to encourage top riders in all disciplines to compete on ex-racehorses. If a winner in a top event, show jumping class, polo match, or any high-level equine competition had raced, it would be eligible for a very significant bonus. Note that I would stipulate that the horse must actually have run as, while I realise that this would have the disadvantage of excluding those that retired unraced due

to being unsound as youngsters or simply too slow, it would avoid the possibility of thoroughbred horses that were produced specifically for other purposes being registered as 'in-training' just to claim bonuses.

I would fund these bonuses from a sales levy on appropriate auction sales. For example, a levy could be charged at sales for horses in and out of training – not on foals, yearlings, or breeding stock – and levied only on horses up to £20,000. The objective would be to increase the value of horses at that level and so, ultimately, the levy would become self-perpetuating.

**P.S.** A really excellent and informative piece by James Willoughby on page 14 this month. If you have a horse or horses trained by me, you must read this. If you only have horses with other trainers, do not read this. It does not apply to you. File it away until you see the light.