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To close or not to close Kempton

I HAVE been uncharacteristically quiet on Kempton despite a constant barrage from the media, owners and trainers who think I should become involved in the argument (why me?). My answer all along has been that, as far as I am concerned, it makes no difference whether an AW track is at Kempton, Chelmsford or Newmarket. Let's face it, they are all pretty much the same and, whatever variation there is between them, it is not enough to make the racing particularly interesting. Of course, if the horses are good enough, it really doesn't matter where you run racing or on what surface. Great racing is great to watch on any surface,

but moderate racing is particularly boring on a bland all-weather track and you can rest assured that, if it is run on the AW in the UK, the surroundings are not going to add anything to the spectacle.

How come the leading trainer at Chelmsford based on number of winners is a certain Mark Johnston?

Our racing is unique for its heritage and its diversity and, if I were a jumps trainer, I would be very upset about losing Kempton just as, as a flat trainer, I was very upset about losing Newcastle's turf track. To most of us, these

decisions to eat into the heritage of British racing are all about greed and an insular, opportunistic, desire to make a quick buck.

The jump trainers are right to be upset and I offer them

my wholehearted support, but don't expect me to claim that it is going to impact on my business. It isn't.

I did, however, think it was a bit ironic that Jockey Club Racecourses should claim a need for an AW course in Newmarket as driving their decision to close Kempton.

Convenient

If Newmarket is so desperate for more opportunities to run on the AW close to home, how come the leading trainer at Chelmsford based on number of winners is a certain Mark Johnston, from Middleham, and the trainer with the most runners is Michael Appleby from Oakham in Rutland? For us, Newmarket would be more convenient than Kempton but Wetherby would be more convenient still and, for some unknown reason, they aren't building an AW track there.

The price is . . . wrong?

I HAVE never really approved of the principles behind Auction races. I find it hard to justify, when we are continually trying to attract more owners into the sport and encourage them to invest as much as possible, that we should give an advantage to those who pay less. How do you explain to a new owner who has just paid £50,000 or more for a yearling that those who paid £10,000 will be given more opportunities to run and/or will receive a weight allowance in races because they paid less? I wonder what this is supposed to achieve for the industry or the thoroughbred breed in the long term. I am particularly puzzled when these races are sponsored by the sales companies who have a direct vested interest in the buyers paying more.

My views are not popular with many of my fellow trainers, or many owners, who see them as elitist but I

can assure you, and them, that I have held these views for a very long time and they are not based on any self interest. Most of you know that, in buying yearlings, even now, I operate very much nearer to the bottom of the market than the top and I have no difficulty in finding horses for Auction and Median Auction contests. But the fact that it suits me doesn't make it right.

As with all types of races, I pride myself in knowing the rules and conditions and using them to best place the horses under my care. It was, therefore, a great shock to me when, having 'corrected' a member of our office team, for amending the sales price records in our entry system to reflect the latest auction price rather

than the yearling sales price, I discovered that she was right and that Auction races for three-year-olds and upwards are based on the latest auction price rather than the yearling or breeze-up sale price as is the case with two-year-olds.

I immediately queried the logic behind this, as I tend to do when it comes to what I see as nonsensical rules and practices in racing, and asked the BHA when this was introduced and why. It transpires that Auction races for three-year-olds and upwards were only introduced in 2014 and it was decided then that qualification should be based on the latest sales price rather than the yearling value. So now, if a well-bred, valuable yearling sells for a six or seven-figure sum but is

subsequently sold for a few thousand pounds, presumably because it is thought to be slow or unsound, it will now be given additional, better, chances to win a race. Why? What are we playing at?

My views are not popular with many of my fellow trainers

EAGERLY AWAITED

READING for me is now a relatively rare pleasure. And, when I say 'now', I mean for the past 40 years. From the day I started university on the veterinary course, there has always been something I should have been reading rather than a novel.

Getting a Kindle has greatly increased the opportunity to read at odd times and in strange places (such as Kempton, between runners) but it is still such a novelty that I choose the material carefully. I am currently reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* and trying to catch up on the classics that I somehow missed in my youth (they are free on Kindle – that appeals to my thrifty nature) so the opportunity to read racing books and/or biographies is limited, to say the least.

I am, however, determined to read the biography of Kieren Fallon (pictured below) when it appears. Kieren Fallon and Paul Haigh – what a combination!

The British racing press is much the poorer for the absence of Paul Haigh and many of his contemporaries, and I cannot wait to read his account of Fallon's life. I imagine that both the author and the subject feel, at least to some extent, disenfranchised by British racing and, while Kieren at least might be said to have brought much of that on himself, the sport has to consider whether it has failed to nurture and make the most of great human assets.

I'm sure John Scanlon will be itching to review the book when it appears and I might get the chance to throw in my tuppence worth.



Last month John Scanlon had a dig at those planning to run a horse race on the streets of London and I, mindful of the fact that they might just succeed and throw egg at all of our faces, sat on the fence a bit (very unlike me) and made a generalised criticism of those who seek to turn racing into a jamboree of novelty events rather than focus on elite competition.

This drew criticism from one of British racing's foremost racing and breeding managers who accused us of negativity towards a company (Great British Racing) whose sole purpose is to grow our client base.

That could hurt, if there were any truth in it, but, like those who say that I favour elitist policies on subjects such as handicapping and Auction races, he is wide of the mark and, frankly, should know me better. I think, although I am open to challenge on the subject, that I embrace change as much as anyone in our sport and I welcome innovative ideas to bring horseracing to a wider audience, but all of you who are in business probably know that many marketing executives need strict control to focus them on the unique selling points of the business. Without it there is a danger of them turning you into a circus and pitching you to their preconceived idea of Mr Average.

Racehorse owners, whether you like it or not, are not Mr or Mrs Average. They are a very small percentage of the population and our marketing should be focussed on them. That is not to say that everyone isn't a potential 'customer' of racing in the widest sense of the word, but we are not so flush with money in this industry that we can afford to go off on wild goose chases. We are tight on ammunition and every shot must count. It is about time we limited the shells that we give to GBR and taught them how to shoot.