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Timely boost for stayers

SOME bizarre things have been done over the last few years in the name of promoting staying races. The Queen's Vase was downgraded from Group 3 to Listed and then upgraded to Group 2 and reduced in distance. I will never understand how the reduction in distance of a race, particularly the first staying pattern race of the year for three-year-olds, could be considered a positive move for stayers.

And then there is this new plethora of races, over distances as short as seven furlongs, under 'Chesham Rules', where eligibility is dependent on the winning distance of the sire (not the sire's progeny). These races are often a 'kick in the teeth' for those sires which are proven influences for stamina as many are ineligible and, when run over shorter distances, sires which are an influence for stamina are inevitably discriminated against.

But, credit where credit is due. It has to be said that there does seem to be an increasing number of opportunities for

stayers and an increasing amount of money on the table.

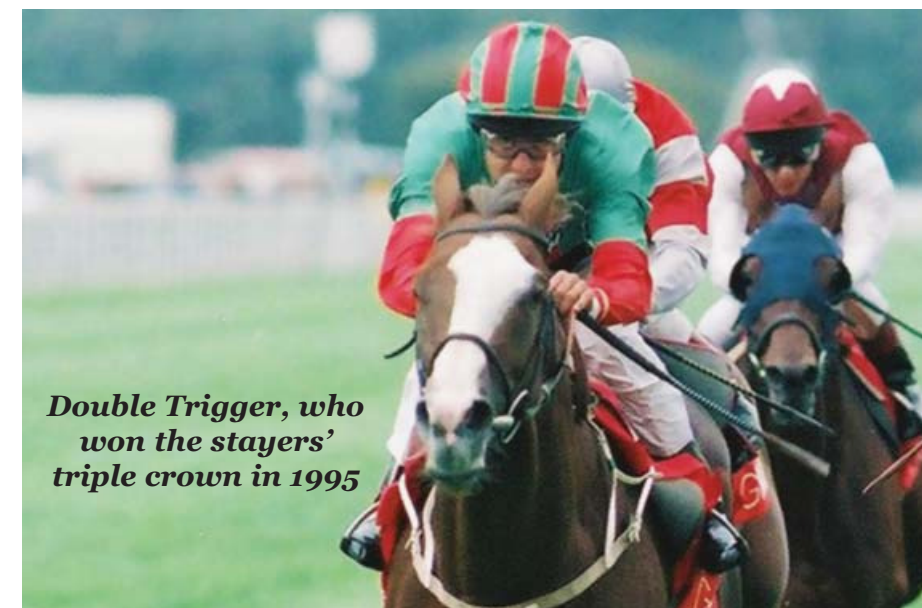
The new £1 Million Weatherbys Hamilton bonus is a tremendous initiative. It will be incredibly hard to win as it requires a horse to win either the Sagaro Stakes, the Ormonde Stakes, the Yorkshire Cup or the Henry II Stakes in May and then go on to win the Ascot Gold Cup, Goodwood Cup and Lonsdale Cup. It will take a true champion to do this, but I can clearly see that it is possible and I can imagine what fun it would be trying, especially as some of these races now have tremendous prize-money in their own right, regardless of the potential bonus.

The only sad thing is that, if you don't currently have a horse which you might consider a candidate for the Cup races, it is a long-term project to find one. But this will surely give a little fillip to the distance-bred lots at the yearling sales. I'll certainly be looking at them with even more enthusiasm than in the past.

I did, however, stumble across one letter in the Racing Post, from a Gerard West, which fiercely criticised the new bonus. Mr. West claimed that Doncaster racecourse is being discriminated against and he decried the omission of the Doncaster Cup from this bonus scheme. He pointed out that the traditional stayers' triple crown comprised the Ascot Gold Cup, the Goodwood Cup and the Doncaster Cup but he claimed that it was last won by Le Moss in 1980 and 1981. It was, of course, won by Double Trigger in 1995, along with the Sagaro Stakes and the Henry II Stakes in the same year.

The Lonsdale Stakes was only a Listed race in 1995 and it was won that year by Double Trigger's, year-younger, full brother Double Eclipse who won the race again two years later when it was upgraded to a Group 3.

Both the Lonsdale Stakes and the Doncaster Cup are now run at Group 2 level (the Doncaster Cup upgraded from a Group 3) but, last year, the first prize



Double Trigger, who won the stayers' triple crown in 1995

in the Lonsdale Cup was more than double that in the Doncaster Cup. So, if the Doncaster Cup is no longer seen as being as prestigious as the Lonsdale Cup, then Doncaster Racecourse only

have themselves to blame and, if I can find myself another Double Trigger, I'll be aiming for the £1 Million bonus rather than the triple crown. That said, Trigger could have done both!

Mounting concern

AT the National Trainers Federation AGM last month, the age-old subject of the direction in which horses walk around the parade ring, and the way they are mounted, was raised again.

It might seem like a rather petty subject, but it is a very serious one indeed.

To recap, for most of my career as a trainer horses were led around the parade ring in a clockwise direction, I think. Like trainers championships, it has changed so many times that I can hardly remember where we started.

Anyway, way back then, it was standard practice for the horse to be brought into the centre of the parade ring to be mounted. I, on the other hand, maybe just because I like to be different or maybe because I really had thought the thing through and saw the dangers involved in what they were doing, used to put my jockeys up at the walk on the parade ring track.

Then some smart chappy at the Jockey Club or BHB saw what we were doing and thought it might be a good idea for everybody to do the same. Now the outside of the parade

ring, which had hitherto been the safest spot when everybody was on the grass in the middle trying to get their jockey up, was crowded with horses, grooms, jockeys and trainers. And trainers, in particular, were getting trapped between the horse, the rails, and the horse coming behind.

After some horrific accidents it was decided by some courses that we should go the other way and have the jockey legged up from the inside where we all felt a lot safer. Now it was the public, leaning over the rails, who were in grave danger of getting their heads kicked off.

So, the ruling as it stands now is that horses shall be mounted at the walk and they will walk in a clockwise

direction unless there is a double barrier of sufficient width to protect the public, in which case they shall walk in an anti-clockwise direction and we will all be relatively safe. This is a rare occurrence. In fact, off the top of my head (which has, so far, miraculously remained in place), I can only think of one, Goodwood, that does it.

At the AGM, some trainers were getting a little restless about having to take this daily risk and were suggesting that racecourses should be obliged to make their parade rings safe for trainers, their staff, and the public, alike. They have a good point. If the parade rings can't be made safe, should a separate area be provided for mounting?

I have always been quite clear in my support for a trainers championship based on prize-money won, despite having headed the alternative numerical table 12 times in my career, but I had to bite my tongue the other day when I realised that the All-Weather trainers championship is decided on winners. Ironically, we are leading the Racing Post All-Weather table which is based, like the overall flat trainers table, on prize-money but we are not leading Arc's championship which is based on number of winners.

Frankly, I lose track of how it is calculated and what period it runs over. I have won it three or four times before (maybe more) but I think their rules keep changing. I'm sure that, at least on one occasion, it was some kind of handicap.

Musselburgh most improved

WHEN I first became a trainer I used to joke that, if you saw a lady wearing a hat at Musselburgh (then Edinburgh) racecourse, she must have got lost on her way to Powderhall dogs. It was a terrible place. If I had been asked to recommend five racecourses for closure, it would certainly have been on my list. If I had been asked to recommend three, I think it might still have been there.

It is a very different story today. I would now rank it as, by far, the most improved racecourse in the country and probably the best of its size. It is an example to all others of what can be done.

And now we hear that its future, or the future of the team that have managed it so successfully over recent years, is uncertain. Apparently, owners East Lothian Council intend to bring the management of the racecourse directly under the control of elected councillors.

Does anyone on East Lothian Council know anything about running a racecourse? How many know anything about running a business? I must admit that I don't know their side of the story and I know nothing about the financial position of Musselburgh racecourse under its current management, but I do know that, from the perspective of trainer, owner, racegoer or occasional visitor, it is a tremendous asset and advertisement for the town and for horseracing.

Only time will tell, but I find it hard to believe that it can maintain its ranking in my list of the best racecourses under a different management regime.