



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

**THANKFULLY**, the record is broken, and we can get back to our normal business of training winners without the racing community, and well beyond, counting down every one. Our Klarion team (Mikaelle, Gerry and John) produced a special edition – what seems only a few days ago – and so here too I can get back to business as usual with some real ‘straight talking’. But, before I move on, I have to say, as John has done in his Off The Bridle piece, that the response from the media, racing professionals, and the general public has been absolutely phenomenal. The media coverage was beyond my imagination and the number of messages of congratulation by snail-mail, e-mail, text, social media, directly, and by every other means of communication known to man has been totally overwhelming. I started off with the intention of replying to everyone but that has proved to be an impossibility. So, thank you now to everyone for your congratulations. It really is appreciated.



## PUTTING UP THE MONEY

Scatter Dice, centre, wins the Cesarewitch for Mark

**B**ACK in May I suggested that plans for a new £1million Cesarewitch might be ‘another con like the sales races and the Weatherbys Super Sprint, where owners are putting up the vast majority of the money’. Our editor, Gerry Hunt, with his experience of mainstream media, said that ‘con’ was too strong a word, even when combined with ‘might be’, but I insisted that we are straight-talking here and that owners’ attention

must be firmly drawn to what is going on.

I said then that we must wait and see how they structured the entry fees and I predicted that an early-closing system would seek to extract the majority of the costs from owners. I pointed out that the Cesarewitch invariably attracts a full field of 36 runners and so this initiative was going to do nothing to promote or increase participation in the race.

The 2018 Cesarewitch, which will be

run on October 13 at a value of £500,000 (the first step towards the 2020 £1million and double last year’s value), closed on August 21 at a cost of £1,000 and 95 horses were entered.

**T**HERE are further stages to come with £2,000 to pay on September 18, a further £2,000 to pay on October 2, and £1,250 if you declare to run on October 8. So, if the Cesarewitch were to continue to attract 36 runners

and, even if the totally unthinkable were to happen and the field was reduced to 36 at the next stage on September 18, owners would have contributed £284,000 or 56.8% of the pot.

Of course the field will not be reduced to 36 at the next stage (unless all owners have read this and decided that they want no part in it) and the fees gathered by Jockey Club Racecourses will be far more than £284,000. Does that sound like a con to you? Dare I say, ‘I told you so’?

**I** CANNOT be held responsible for Charlie Brooks disagreeing with what I didn’t say. Nor can I be held responsible for his abject inability to understand what I did say.

I don’t get the Telegraph but on the few occasions that I have had the opportunity to read Charlie Brooks’ column I have been surprised by how well the Englishman (he is another, like the editor of the Racing Post, who seems to feel that it is a slur on me to describe me as a Scotsman) writes. Unfortunately, however, it seems that his privileged education did little for his knowledge of the sciences.

He claims that I have accused unspecified numbers of my fellow trainers of doping their horses because I said: ‘Why would any idiot give them

cobalt? Yet people do, because they’ll give them whatever some clown tells them is going to make them run faster. The most disappointing thing is the ignorance of people who will give things to horses with no evidence it’s going to make them go any quicker. They’re all looking for something to turn lead into gold’.

### Attitude

Those might not have been my exact words but I certainly accept that that is the gist of what I said and what I believe. I think I also went on to say that I am equally disappointed with the BHA attitude and the fact that they put so much emphasis on the search for substances such as cobalt when I do not believe for

one second that it makes horses run any faster.

Brooks says this is a change of stance on my part from 19 years ago when I took him to task for saying that large numbers of trainers were doping their horses. I certainly reserve the right to change my mind – those who cannot change their opinion in the face of new evidence are the worst kind of idiots – but, in this case, I haven’t done so. For a start, 19 years ago, Robin Bastiman and other trainers could have given as much cobalt or vitamin B12 (the substance Bastiman gave to his horse) as they liked – apart from the fact that large quantities of Cobalt would probably kill the horse – as these, naturally occurring substances, were not prohibited. It would not, in anyone’s language, have been considered

‘doping’.

Back then Brooks was suggesting that some trainers were gaining a significant advantage by giving prohibited substances to their horses and I said then, as I am saying now, that the substances and procedures, which he claimed were being widely used at the time, would not make horses run faster.

**I** F I remember rightly, he was effectively suggesting that he was disadvantaged because he was not doping his horses and that this was one explanation for his failing training career. I was saying, and am still saying, that, with the exception of anabolic steroid use, I do not feel disadvantaged at all as I do not think attempts to increase blood cell volume, even if they worked, would

**THE BHA** like to say that they lead the field on anti-doping for all sports. There is a lot of truth in that as, at least for as long as I have been a trainer, the rules on drug use have been much more stringent in horse racing than in any other sport and to this day there is accepted drug use in other sports that has never been tolerated in horse racing.

That said, I sometimes wonder at their methodology and totally agree with Jim Boyle that, for the BHA to conduct a ‘dawn raid’ (the name now widely applied, including by BHA officials themselves, to the practice of out-of-competition drug testing) at his yard on the morning of the Epsom Open Day was unnecessary and ill-conceived. Like Jim Boyle, I am all for testing and for a zero-tolerance stance on performance-enhancing drugs, but, as with their increasing emphasis on products of doubtful significance (e.g. cobalt), I wonder what image their approach is giving to the public.

Was their decision to choose that particular day to visit Jim Boyle’s yard a totally random one, or is some misguided official actually looking to choose a time when there would be more public attention? I hope it was a random decision and that they can accept that it was a mistake.

afford any advantage to the horse.

The BHA response to my statement was to repeatedly say that they believed that cobalt was ‘potentially’ performance-enhancing. The operative word, of course, was ‘potentially’ and you will now find it in all their statements about cobalt. I do not fully understand the mechanism by which the presence of increased levels of cobalt can, apparently, stimulate erythropoiesis (the production of red blood cells) but I know that there is disagreement on whether or not cobalt is effective in increasing red blood cell production in humans and serious concerns about the damage that it causes. But, above all, I do not believe that increasing red blood cell production in racehorses would have any effect on performance.