



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

FROM long before I had a trainer's licence – and that is a long time ago now – I was a fan of the middle and long-distance races. I am well known for it and, to this day, I think, if you ask people to name a horse trained by Mark Johnston, they will still, most likely, say Double Trigger, despite the fact that it is now more than 20 years since he ran. How could I not be a fan and how could I not support any initiative to promote the staying horse?

But supporting the principle and agreeing with the methods are two very different things. It is now well documented in this column that I was never taken in by Jockey Club Racecourses' claim that their move to vastly increase the Cesarewitch prize-money was driven by anything other than self-interest. It does nothing for the staying horse and it can certainly be argued that, by robbing owners, and restricting the quality of horse that can run for this enormous prize, they risk doing harm to both the industry and the thoroughbred breed.

On the other hand, I would not for a second suggest that there was any self-interest behind the BHA race-planning department's introduction of sire and dam-restricted races as part of the same initiative - that might just have been down to ignorance or a simple lack of 'nous'.

FLAWED THINKING?

These races, run to what many of us would call 'Chesham Rules' (the Listed Chesham Stakes has, for many years, been restricted to the progeny of sires who themselves won over 10 furlongs or more), were introduced last year (or was it the year before?) as part of this initiative to support the staying horse. And this year, presumably because they weren't working, the rules were modified to make it sire or dam and upped the distance over which this parent must have won to 12 furlongs in some of the races. They still don't work, and they won't, as the principle is flawed. If the aim is to promote the staying horse, you need to put on races for horses with stamina, not for horses who have a parent who had stamina. They are



Double Trigger

two very different things.

According to Weatherbys there have been 14 of these races run so far in 2018 (I thought there were more): seven at seven furlongs, six at a mile, and one, a nursery handicap, at 10 furlongs. The sires of the seven-furlong winners were Dutch Art (2 winners) (stamina index – average winning distance of his progeny – 7.6f); Dubawi (2 winners) (9.6f); Raven's Pass (9f); Arch (9.1f); and Mukhadram (-). The average stamina

index of the sires is 8.75f. I suspect that might be the average for the sires of most seven-furlong winners, regardless of restrictions. The average stamina index for the dam's sires was 9.3f.

Increase the distance of the races to one mile and you see a very different picture. Now the sires are Nathaniel (12f); Galileo (11.2f); Pastorious (-); Sea the Stars (two winners) (11.2f); and Frankel (9.9f). Now, just by increasing the distance of the race by one furlong, you have increased the average stamina index of the sires by 2.35f to 11.1f.

Of course, it should be said that sires such as Galileo, Frankel and Sea the Stars do not need any promotion and most certainly do not need restricted races for their progeny, but most annoying to me is the fact that the progeny of a sire such as Cape Cross (who has perhaps been one of the greatest influences for high-class stamina horses in recent years, with champions including Ouija Board, Sea the Stars and Golden Horn to his name), are not eligible for these races because he didn't win over 10 furlongs. Yet the progeny of Shamardal, who, much as I love him, cannot be considered an influence for stamina, do qualify because he won over 10 furlongs, once. As I have said, the race conditions are badly flawed.

The answer is simple. If you want to promote horses with stamina, put on more races and more prize-money for horses with stamina. That is, if you want to promote stayers at all. Some very knowledgeable breeders don't agree with the initiative in the first place.

Wind ops under scrutiny

THE article by Simon Rowlands and Jason Hathorn on wind surgeries (see page 10) is very, *very* interesting indeed.

I was always aware that there were some in the BHA with truly altruistic motives for introducing the rules which made the declaration of wind surgery since a last run compulsory. They believed that wind surgery was ineffectual, wrong and that, by declaring that horses had had wind surgery since their last run, they would demonstrate that it was worthless.

I also think that wind surgery is wrong. I have often said that, if it works we shouldn't be doing it – we don't allow performance-enhancing drugs, so why would we allow performance-enhancing surgery? – and, if it doesn't work, we shouldn't

be doing it. It is clearly unethical to put animals through a surgical procedure if there is no benefit to the animal. However, I did not believe that the surgery should be declared.

I believed that the 'information' being given to the public was misinformation in that it didn't distinguish between different types of surgery; it couldn't be policed (i.e. they couldn't confirm which horses had had surgery); and it didn't take account of those horses which had had surgery before ever running, or those that had run abroad since surgery. Above all, I feared that if large numbers of people believed that this surgery worked and enhanced performance, and that seemed to be the case, the procedure would be pushed underground and significant

numbers of horses would have surgery unnecessarily before running so that it never needed to be declared.

However, if Jason and Simon are right, and it can be demonstrated that horses' ability generally declines for having surgery, the BHA were right and the rule change will have been very worthwhile.

SADLY, however, I have noted that the racing media are still working on the assumption that a horse can be expected to improve for having had surgery and, consequently, my fears are still well founded.

Jason and Simon admit that they still have very little data to work with, but we must all hope that their initial findings prove to be correct and that more data strengthens their case.

THE BOGEY MAN COMETH

BACK in the October Klarion I warned you: Beware the 'bogey man'. And now, for those of you who don't have back issues of this magazine occupying pride of place on your coffee table, I think it is timely and important for me to remind you of what I said.

I had had a discussion about cobalt, its potential as a performance enhancer (or lack of it), and its new status as a perceived threat to the integrity of horseracing, with an experienced owner, breeder and veterinary surgeon. He suggested to me that governing bodies and regulators commonly create a 'bogey man' – a threat – and then ask for more money to protect against it.

Following this conversation, I wrote in the Klarion that 'the risk to the

integrity of horseracing from the use of cobalt as a doping agent is being blown totally out of proportion and that many of the measures being used by the BHA in the name of upholding racing's integrity are heavy-handed and totally unnecessary. Not to mention, very expensive'.

I conceded that the BHA may not have created this particular bogey man themselves. I suggested that they may well have borrowed or inherited him from Australia but I accused them of running with him and, with help from the media, using him to poison the minds of racegoers and followers of the sport.

Well, two months on, they are still running with him and at a recent media briefing the BHA announced its commitment to improving its integrity, compliance and anti-doping operations. Their 'improvements' include increasing testing in Group races on the flat and Grade 1 races over jumps to

include the first four home, rather than just the winner, and enhanced testing for more substances such as cobalt and alkalisating agents ('milk shakes'). More personnel will also be added to the integrity team.

This was all reported by the Racing Post as representing a 'significant escalation of British racing's war on doping'. War! That sounds serious. I wonder what that does for public perception of our sport. And who is the enemy? The bogey man!

I, of course, was not invited to this media briefing. I would not expect to be. If I had been present, I would have been asking, as these new measures were introduced on September 1, how many more positive tests have there been as a result? And what evidence was there of increased doping in British racing to suggest that this increased testing was required? And, what is it all costing? And, is it necessary or worth it? And, who created the bogey man?