Mark Johnston's Straight Talking

Congratulations, Ascot

HAPPY NEW YEAR! Lang may yer lum reek, and all that. The New Year is a time to try to look forward and be positive, however hard that may seem in this industry of ours at present. So I'm going to start it off with some good news for owners, especially for those owners who have taken a chance on a slow-maturing, middle-distance type. And, let's face it, they don't get good news very often.

So, I am delighted to share with you – particularly with my fellow fans of staying races – excerpts from an email which I received from Nick Smith of Ascot Racecourse. In it, he says: 'Following our conversations on the Queen's Vase, I wanted to let you know that we have taken what you said about the early closing date on board, and accept that it's very difficult to be able to make accurate predictions about which horses may be suitable for the race as an early closer in April. It will therefore revert to regular closing in 2019.'

Well done, Nick. Well done Ascot. Thank you for listening and, above all, thank you for putting the interests of owners, the interests of racing, and the future of the breed, ahead of your own finances.

This will cost Ascot dearly, especially as it is their intention to stand by their pledge to increase the value of the race by a further £25,000 to a whopping £225,000 this year. The move to an early closing format took owners' contributions to prize-money for the Queen's Vase from around 12.5% to more than 50% and the chances are that, by reverting to standard six-day closing, that contribution will revert to previous levels and Ascot will have to make up the difference. Good on them.

WE all know that the only reason racecourses set early closing dates for races is to extract more money from owners. It does nothing to enhance the quality of the field; if anything, it does exactly the opposite. It is common practice, especially in the most valuable races, but it was particularly wrong for the Queen's Vase because young staying horses are only just beginning to step up in trip in the spring of their three-year-old year and April is too early to judge which might be best suited to a race like the Queen's Vase. Ascot have recognised this and acted accordingly.

The other, much greater, abuse of the early closing system which I have highlighted in these pages in the past year is in the Cesarewitch. What chance that Jockey Club Racecourses will also take note and rectify the situation? A fat chance, I fear.

Sceptical . . .

THERE is not much to look forward to in 2019 for the betting industry. It is going to be an extremely tough year for them. Their income could drop dramatically. With the maximum stake for one 'spin' on a one-armed bandit, armless bandit, FOBT, or whatever you want to call it, cut from £100 to £2, punters who go into a betting shop with their weekly wage packet (or access to it through a piece of plastic) might leave with enough for the housekeeping if they can't lose it fast enough. It is a terrible state of affairs. Thousands of shops could close. The racing industry should brace itself for a drop in its income. In fact, the horsemen better just accept a cut in income now, just in case.

Well, excuse me for being a bit sceptical, but have we not had some sort of sob story from the bookmakers nearly every year since I started training and probably for many years before that? And, in recent years, since the bookmakers started paying much more in media rights money directly to the racecourses, instead of everything in the garden being rosy and prize-money exploding to 1994 levels, we have had sob stories from many of the racecourses instead. Apparently, we should be very grateful that prize-money hasn't fallen even further, in real terms, and, after all, the racecourse experience has vastly improved. ARC no longer take £100 out of your prize-money for a glass bowl, most racecourses give the owners a sandwich, and some give a three-course meal (don't tell anyone, but that was all covered by a change in the way they collected entry fees too).

Of course, if we had genuinely been working together all these years to maximise betting revenue and to maintain the popularity of horseracing for that purpose, they might not be in this fix or, at least, we would be able to understand just how big a fix it is and what impact it is truly going to have. But, for as long as I can remember, bookmakers have been working to reduce their reliance on horseracing in favour of cheaper alternatives, especially machines. And it has all been, and still is, very secretive. We don't really know how their businesses operate, what part racing plays, or what part it could have played. And, since the racecourses have become the principal conduit for the flow of money from betting to racing, they have chosen to keep us in the dark as well. Let's not forget all the promises of new income from abroad in return for 48- hour declarations. How much is it? Why can't we find out?

> 'Is the punter who loses slowly not more likely to lose it all?'

All we know is that, from where we stand, they, the bookmakers and the racecourses, still look to be doing very nicely indeed. Sure, the bookies maybe aren't doing quite so well as in their heyday, before their market was flooded with competition, but it might not have been so easy for others to muscle in if they hadn't deliberately run down their core business, horserace betting.

Through many of the years that I have been training, the big bookmakers were investing their profits into other activities. Hotel chains seemed to be a favourite. Now it is the racecourses that are building hotels. How has that come about? I have done far better out of this industry than the vast majority of trainers and I am now lucky enough to mix with some of the most successful trainers alive, but I'm yet to see one build a hotel by the gallops and I can't think of one who has managed to get enough out of racing to diversify into anything else. It is usually the other way around.

I am still very sceptical about whether this cut in the FOBT maximum stake per spin will result in a drop in turnover and 'take' in the betting shops – is the punter who loses slowly not more likely to lose it all? – and I have no idea whether a drop will truly lead to mass closure of betting shops. I do accept that, if it does, it will have a knock-on effect for racecourses because of the way they have structured their media rights deals, but this is all very far removed from my product, horses which race.

The cost of producing horses to race has not gone down – far from it – so why should the price paid for that product be reduced?

I'd be very interested to hear whether the cost of a FOBT machine has already dropped and whether the people in the factories that make them have been told to expect closures and/or a drop in wages.

Very many congratulations to Raye Wilkinson on being made an MBE. It is great to see him get a little recognition for his many years of selfless work. Few know that, when he isn't helping stable staff, he helps orphaned and injured owls and, at this time of year, we see evidence of his good work most mornings on the gallops – on horseback and in the air.

A paper reborn?

LIKE John Scanlon (page 25), I too was impressed with Katherine Fidler's Racing Post article on the potential for using horses and ponies to widen our audience for racing, but I cannot let her claim all the credit for this, hardly novel, idea. Have I not been saying for years that we should remember that the most important player in horseracing is the horse and the second most important the person who owns it? Have I not been warning about the ever-increasing media emphasis on the betting at the expense of the sport and its participants?

But, whenever I did, my views were ridiculed by many of her colleagues, in particular her outgoing editor, and I was branded naïve.

Could this really be the beginning of a new era for the Racing Post? Could it be about to become a racing paper again? Wouldn't that be great?