



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## Moving the goalposts

**F**EDERICO TESIO famously declared: "The thoroughbred exists because its selection has depended, not on experts, technicians or zoologists, but on a piece of wood: the winning post of the Epsom Derby. If you base your criteria on anything else, you will get something else, not the thoroughbred". We remember that he said it because it is, so obviously, right. Simple, selective breeding for a single characteristic. When you introduce more than one objective or stop testing rigorously for your principal criteria, as Tesio said, you will get something else.

The BHA have a stated aim to reduce fatalities on the racecourse as near as possible to zero and, as part of their aim, they have introduced trot-ups before the Grand National, at Cheltenham, for horses that were found to be lame after a previous race, and for those that have been off the course for a long time. Presumably they are looking to prevent those horses from running which, in the opinion of their veterinary officers, are more likely to be injured. Some want to roll these trot-ups out to more races. They are, in effect, now looking, not just for the fastest horse but for the fastest, soundest, horse.

And, as we have discussed, there are those who want to remove the whip along with other methods of encouraging the horse to run faster or even to run at all.

Now they want to select for the fastest, soundest, most willing horse. When that day comes, the thoroughbred, as Tesio knew it, no longer exists. You have something else.

## IN FEAR OF THE WORST

**F**OR ALMOST as long as I have been involved professionally in horseracing I have feared for the future of the sport and the thoroughbred breed itself.

Back in 1991 Carrie Humble founded The Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre and was the first, as far as I am aware, to introduce the concept of retired racehorses having somehow been damaged by having participated in the sport and being in need of 'rehabilitation'. The Jockey Club's answer to her claims was to give her money and they opened the floodgates for people with a livery yard to gain charity status and raise money to keep themselves in business.

### Opportunity

A new 'public perception' of welfare issues associated with racing was created where none had existed before, despite there being no significant welfare problem in British equines and virtually none in racehorses and thoroughbred breeding stock. It is, for obvious reasons, easier to raise money from the owners of racehorses than it is from the owners of 'fly-grazed' cobs or laminitic ponies and there were many who saw the opportunity for growth in this charity market.

Around the same time the anti-whip lobby appeared and again there was a knee-

jerk reaction from the Jockey Club. Limits on the use of the whip, both in style and frequency, were introduced and in 1996 they punished the first three jockeys home in Mark Of Esteem's Guineas, after a thrilling finish, including Jason Weaver on our own Bijou D'Inde. I said at the time that it was the thin end of the wedge and, nearly 26 years on, that wedge is steadily being driven home year on year.

In recent months the situation has reached a pinnacle and I have begun to despair. Parliament's debate on whether responsibility for racehorse welfare should be removed from BHA hands and given to some independent body was called in response to a YouGov e-poll commissioned by animal rights (not welfare) activists, Animal Aid. The politicians involved in that cross-party debate are, almost entirely, driven by the quest for votes: they want a majority of votes and are likely to side with majority opinion, regardless of how informed or qualified to express an opinion that majority may be. And it seems the BHA, like the BHB and Jockey Club before them, have decided that the opinions of this ill-informed majority and their perception of racehorse welfare is more important to our sport than horse welfare itself.

I cringed at John Francome's recent comments on the whip and was not at all

surprised when some in the media, such as the Racing Post's recently replaced editor Bruce Millington, latched on to this and claimed it as indicating support from among the most knowledgeable in racing for their anti-whip views. I have a great deal of respect for John Francome and would not argue with those who still hail him as the greatest jump jockey of all time, but I simply could not believe that someone who made his living out of jump racing and claims to have the future of British racing at heart could say such things.

### Staggered

Apart from the fact that my understanding of horse behaviour is poles apart from his, and he obviously hasn't even considered my reasons for believing that whips are essential in horseracing, I was staggered that he cannot see that those most vociferous in their opposition to the use of whips in racing would not stop there if they succeeded in having it banned. The word 'whip' is carved fairly close to the sharp end of that wedge which they are driving home. 'Jumping' is just behind it and the thick end has 'horseracing' written all over it.

The recent debacle over the fining of Henry Oliver for waving his arms at his horse and the BHA's ludicrous response might, at last, have shown just how foolish it is to pander to those with an extreme, and totally unrealistic view, of how horses should best be handled and treated if their welfare is truly the primary concern. Sadly, it also probably confirmed that there are many in the BHA and some in the wider racing community who share those extreme and unrealistic views, and that is what makes me fear for the future of our sport and the thoroughbred breed.

□ Elsewhere in this issue Steve Harman talks about his time at the helm of the BHA. He may be thanking his lucky stars that he is no longer there when some are describing BHA credibility as being at an all-time low, but it would be foolish to think that this situation would not have arisen if Steve Harman was still in control.

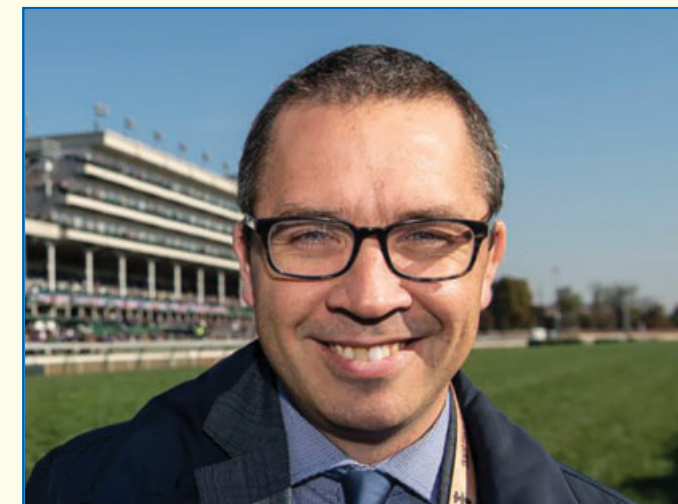
During his tenure it would be fair to say that the BHA enjoyed a period of relative stability and it was clearly held

in higher regard at Westminster than ever before. We could, at last, hold our own against the betting industry's lobbyists, and racing was pretty much presenting a united front to government.

As chairman he was instrumental in choosing his own chief executive and most of us think he made a very good choice. He was also largely responsible for the restructuring of the board and people such as myself, Bill Farnsworth of Musselburgh racecourse, and trainer's

husband Justin Wadham were replaced with people deemed to have more commercial and political experience and expertise in the areas which Steve was looking to focus on. I, at least, was very happy to go at the end of my term but my biggest reservation was the lack of horse knowledge on the board and among the executive.

I always feared that they were totally unequipped to deal with any crisis specifically requiring an in-depth knowledge of horsemanship, equine husbandry, and, in short, the sport's participants. This is now proving to be the case.



## Forristal is on the ball

**I**NEVITABLY, people of today are more detached from working with, living with, or depending on animals than they were in the past. We have touched upon the fact that the majority of people who might have an opinion on horse welfare actually have no understanding whatsoever of the subject and, unfortunately, this ignorance extends into those who work in the regulation of racing, the racing media, and even into those who work with the horses themselves.

As a result, I have come to mistrust the racing media and have, in particular, accused some Racing Post journalists of inflicting serious damage on racing through their ignorance of the animals involved and their propensity to follow the majority viewpoint regardless.

### Controversies

I was, therefore, most surprised to find the most informed piece of writing on the subject of racehorse welfare, the BHA, and the current controversies in the Racing Post on January 31. It was Richard Forristal's Thursday column and I would urge you all to read it, if you haven't done so already. And read it again if you have.

It should be compulsory reading for all those working for, or in any way associated with, the BHA. It says it all.