



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## Re-think required on welfare concerns

“**T**HERE isn't a queue of better people waiting at the gate”. That's a phrase that the late Rory McDonald of the British Racing school used when we engaged him to carry out our staff training programme in the mid-1990s and he was trying to wean our yard managers away from the 'shape up or ship out' attitude that prevailed in our industry, and many others, at the time.

I have remembered it and used it regularly ever since and it has come to my mind a lot recently as I have observed the mounting pressure on BHA chief executive Nick Rust from some of my fellow trainers. That said, Nick Rust and the BHA board would have benefitted from that same advice when they saw fit to oust their chairman, Steve Harman, without provision for a replacement or any plan for restructuring their board.

I, for one, am certainly not calling for Nick Rust to go and I think that, if he were to resign now, it would leave the BHA in tatters. They are already in a mess and it is going to take some strong leadership to get them back on track. Steve Harman's moves to rid his board of

sectional interests were based on sound reasoning but, as I warned repeatedly at the time, left them vulnerable if there was a crisis which involved horses. The recent crises, have mostly involved horses and horsemanship and the board has been found wanting, to say the least. However, their plan, to reintroduce stakeholder representatives with the racecourses clearly holding sway, is a huge step backwards.

### Performance

Nick Rust has been an excellent chief executive and he has appeared willing to meet, and listen to, all participants since taking on the role. He clearly has the best interests of British racing at heart but I fear he has been listening too much to, and learning from, the wrong people. He is trudging down the wrong track, particularly on horse welfare, with the wrong people at his back.

His performance on Luck On Sunday last month was appalling. It is no wonder whatsoever that it drove Henrietta Knight, Charlie Egerton and Mick Channon to write their open letter to the

Racing Post. They were right. He was patronising, to horsemen in particular. He quoted statistics and stated his beliefs on horse welfare as fact when I know that he does not have the data or evidence to support his statements. He suggested that the BHA's policies and procedures had already resulted in a reduced fatality rate at Cheltenham, when it is very likely that injury and fatality rates at a National Hunt festival meeting are much more likely to be governed by the state of the ground than by anything the BHA vets do and the figures he was quoting were, almost certainly, not statistically significant.

Please don't forget that this BHA board and chief executive, who are now claiming that they can reduce injury rates and fatalities by having their veterinary team trot horses up before a meeting to assess their fitness to compete, are the same ones who presided over legislation to penalise trainers for stating that the horses they care for are not fit to run. Is it any wonder that trainers find that attitude condescending?

Nick Rust and his team are effectively saying that they are better judges of

whether horses I train are fit to run than I am. They might say that not all trainers are the same, that not all trainers have the veterinary background that I have, but their opportunity to question trainers' capabilities and suitability for the position should come at the time of licensing, just as Henrietta Knight and her colleagues said. It is not for them to decide where and when the horses should run.

I have had many instances over the last couple of seasons where BHA vets have trotted my horses up before racing and at least one where they prevented the horse from running. I think they were wrong to do so and subsequent performances of those horses proved me right – they were, almost invariably, prolific runners and winners. They will say that it was part of their quest to reduce 'avoidable risk' and, of course, any withdrawal of a runner reduces risk, but I would argue that their procedures

do little or nothing to identify those at highest risk.

Soundness and fitness to run is not a 'black or white' call and veterinary opinion is exactly that: opinion. Expert opinion, perhaps, but when it comes to training racehorses and assessing fitness to run, veterinary opinion doesn't necessarily trump all other opinion and an opinion based on nothing more than a trot-up and cursory examination at the track is of little value in assessing risk.

It may surprise you – it surprised me –

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to hear that trials on lameness detection, including in groups of experienced equine practitioners, have resulted in a wide variation of opinion on which leg horses are lame on. And that's before anyone has been asked to consider why.

The BHA are not only accepting the opinion of their veterinary officers as definitive but they are passing those opinions to the public, as fact, through

social media, in the name of 'transparency'. That Nick Rust and the board of the BHA can think that these policies will have a positive effect on public perception of racehorse welfare staggers me. There needs to be a major rethink.

In a recent Racing Post article Julian Muscat said that pre-race veterinary inspections are an exercise in correct protocol. He reminded us that it was a pre-race veterinary inspection of Ouija Board in Hong Kong that brought the great mare's career to an end in December 2006 and he told us that Ed Dunlop maintained that whatever was troubling the vet was of no account, it was just the way Ouija Board was. Julian

states that, 'welfare concerns won through; the mare could not run'.

Clearly, to my mind, he has not considered the possibility, or should I say probability, and neither has Nick Rust, that, if the Hong Kong vets had been making the call before her 22 previous runs, rather than Ed Dunlop and his team, we would have missed out on one of the best mares in racing history.

**I**T is unfortunate that some recent criticism of the BHA has focused on the nationality of some of their executives. Even I, in my response to Richard Wells's letter to last month's Klarion, questioned why we have Australians as BHA directors. Perhaps it should be said that that was my personal response to Richard and I had not intended it for publication in the Klarion but, no matter, I wrote it and stand by what I said. Thankfully, it is still deemed acceptable to criticise or ridicule people based, principally or in part, on their being Australian, Irish, Welsh or Scottish (I have plenty personal experience of that!) when to make reference to some other nationalities, ethnic origins, or religions in a critical manner is considered totally unacceptable and risks prosecution.

But there are legitimate concerns about those Australian executives in the BHA and some of their predecessors: not because of their ethnic origin, but due to their common

## My unease over the wisdom of Oz

background in Australian racing and what they have brought to the job. It is the Australianisation of British racing that concerns me. I am not alone in that concern, and I had a meeting with Nick Rust nearly two years ago to specifically raise this issue.

### Alternative

There was considerable disquiet among trainers when we switched to Australian starting stalls. We have learned to live with them, accept that stalls issues will always be blamed on the trainers and, in truth, we are no worse off than we were previously. But there are alternative stalls manufactured in Europe which many believe are at least as good and a lot

cheaper. The numbering of our draw was altered from, left to right in the direction that the horses are facing, to numbering from the inside. This was done to 'make it simpler for international audiences' but, years on, I am still totally lost when it comes to Windsor and I even get confused sometimes at regular haunts such as Goodwood and Hamilton. The old method was consistent for all British tracks; the new method works perfectly in Australia, but not here.

These are minor issues that won't have any bearing on the future of our sport, but there are many more important changes to the way we approach stewarding, integrity and welfare which have also been drawn from other jurisdictions where the racing and its financial structure are very different from ours.

Nick Rust, rightly, said it was wrong to criticise his team based on their nationality, but his analogy about New Zealand and Australian coaches in rugby was nearly as bad as his likening racing to blood sports. Let's face it, there is little denying that we could learn a lot from New Zealand's approach to rugby – maybe less from Australia – and, as far as I am aware, we all play by the same rules. And, he was keen to point out that his Australian executives have experience in other major racing jurisdictions such as Hong Kong.

Well, much as we admire Hong Kong and Australian racing, particularly for their tote monopolies, financial stability, and tremendous prize-money, our racing is not like theirs and we do not want it to be. We have very different – many would say, better – unique selling points, including by far the best National Hunt racing in the world, and we want to see the BHA concentrating on those.