



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

BHA MUST CLARIFY THEIR POSITION ON RIDING INSTRUCTIONS

TRANSparency is a word the BHA use quite a lot these days. Many of their actions, which some of us find quite puzzling and difficult to understand, are apparently done “in the interests of transparency”.

Following their latest pre-race interrogation of a visiting Irish trainer, Ronan McNally, at Southwell on June 24 before his The Jam Man won the novice handicap chase, a BHA spokesperson said: “The BHA may wish to speak to individuals at racecourses as part of its regulation and monitoring of British racing. All such instances are logged on the BHA’s website in the interests of transparency”.

Well, that’s about as transparent as a jar of Southwell sand.

The website tells us that the trainer and jockey were interviewed before the race

and asked to provide information regarding the choice of race, their expectations, and the riding instructions given. “Their explanations were noted”, it states.

What’s transparent about that? Where were their explanations noted? Aren’t we, in the interests of transparency, or just to satisfy our sheer nosiness, going to be told what the explanations were?

I appreciate that if the BHA are investigating a suspected wrongdoing they may not be able to give us all the details of their suspicions or the evidence they have gathered, but I am particularly concerned that this new policy – perhaps, in the interests of transparency, they could tell us whether it is a new policy or if it has been going on unnoticed for years – seems to focus on riding instructions and tactics. I’d like to know how relevant the stewards believe the riding instructions are and what they think they might learn from this type

of inquiry.

It appears that these pre-race inquiries are being held when horses have been heavily backed and recent form does not support that level of confidence. If that is the case, would it not be the riding instructions prior to previous runs which would be most relevant? Maybe they know that no trainer or jockey is going to be quite daft enough to say that the instructions were to prevent the horse from winning. But, that being the case, what is the point in asking the question?

WHILE on the subject of riding instructions, you may remember that I wrote many years ago about The Jockey Club – racing’s administrator at the time – giving us trainers a two-page guide on how to

give riding instructions. And only a couple of years ago the National Trainers Federation thought it was worthwhile to hold workshops where a barrister told us what the BHA might expect, in the way of riding instructions, if we are ever questioned on suspicion of preventing a horse from obtaining its best possible position.

On both occasions it was suggested that stewards expect trainers to instruct the jockey on where to position the horse in the field and when to ‘make a move’. Granted, there may be some trainers who think such instructions are reasonable but, to my mind, it is totally ridiculous to instruct a jockey on where he should position a horse relative to other runners when you have no idea how fast the other runners are going to be going.

I am well-known for having front-runners and yet I can honestly say that, as I approach 28,000 runners as a trainer, I have never told a jockey to aim to front run. I’m not that daft.

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For the last few years, since realising that BHA rules expect adequate instructions to be given to the jockey, when I am not going to be present in person my representatives are expected to phone me, Deirdre or Charlie, to obtain instructions. Those instructions are almost invariably to ‘take it as it comes’. As far as I am concerned, those are adequate instructions

and they are the instructions which are most likely to result in a winner. Anything more complicated reduces, rather than increases, the chance of winning.

Irish trainer Charles Byrnes, who has been questioned by stewards about riding instructions on three visits to Britain this year, said that he felt the BHA were trying to force him into giving in-depth instructions to his

jockeys and it is not something he has ever done. It is not something that I ever do either and, rules or no rules, I am not going to start now. My aim is to win races. We can’t win every time but, of course, the aim of every runner is to do so. That goes without saying and I’m not about to start giving instructions which I believe would compromise the chances.

☐ The BHA recently posted on Twitter that, in 2018, they took nearly 10,000 raceday samples for analysis; and they took more than 2,000 out-of-competition samples including international runners, sales testing, and their routine British-based (‘dawn raid’) testing programme.

I couldn’t help replying and asking whether this was something to boast about; how many positives they had had; what substances had been found; and whether this level of testing was justified? I didn’t expect, or get, a reply.

Of course, there needs to be testing to deter against any misuse of prohibited substances but I cannot see that the amount of testing is justified or appropriately targeted. And, sadly, we give the impression that the sport has a serious drug issue when nothing could be further from the truth.

Our new BHA chairman, Annamarie Phelps, comes from the sport of rowing and she chaired an independent review into British cycling in 2017. Cycling was generally perceived as having the biggest drug problem of all sport, and arguably the greatest Tour de France cyclist of all time, Lance Armstrong, was stripped of his titles after a doping

scandal. Now the sport is considered to have been largely ‘cleaned up’. How did they achieve that? Was it rule changes, testing, or a change of culture?

It strikes me that times in cycling have not declined since the clean-up. Does that suggest that there wasn’t as much drug use as was thought to be the case, or that the drugs, and other performance-enhancing measures, weren’t as effective as the cyclist had been led to believe? Mrs Phelps might have a view on this.

And she might have a view on the way our sport is viewed by our own fans and followers, how it is viewed by others, and what role BHA policies on welfare and integrity have played in driving perception of the sport. It strikes me that, as far as I am aware, no other sport, whether there is significant betting on it or not, routinely holds enquiries into performance before or after the event.

Imagine if the FA asked managers of football clubs to



Annamarie Phelps

explain the poor performance of their team whenever they failed to match the betting market’s expectations. Imagine if they were questioned on why a certain player had failed to score or, indeed, had scored more than in recent matches, and their replies were made public. Imagine if it was a requirement for them to declare any injuries or ailments and FA doctors examined players whenever the FA deemed their performance to be below expectations. What would that do for public perception of integrity in football?

On the last Saturday in June, when we had five winners from 19 runners, I still received several emails accusing me of cheating, deliberately preventing horses from winning, incompetence, employing incompetent jockeys, and employing tactics which did not suit the horse. I can’t ever go racing without being asked “will it win?” And, ridiculous as it might seem, many actually believe that I know.

Do the BHA do anything to educate our followers about the realities of the sport? Do the racing media? Or do BHA policies and the way our sport is portrayed in the media perpetuate the misunderstandings and ignorance? Perhaps officials and pundits share the public’s dim views about our sport and its participants.

☐ I WAS heartened to receive the following email from author David Winter. It makes the effort and expense involved worthwhile, and is a great tribute to our staff, such as Barry Lusted pictured here.



I would like to place on record the fantastic way your staff present themselves and your horses at the racecourse. Always professional, they are immaculate with their tartan-themed clothing, while the horses have their bridle badges with your logo. I am sure it must all be expensive to fund and must lead to some discourse between you all on whether it justifies the outlay. I can only say as a member of the racing public that it is the very best advert for your stable and immediately indicates a quality organisation. I wish you all at your stable the very best.