



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

THE HONOUR WAS ALL MINE

THE stories of Shamardal, the great and influential stallion; Shamardal, the elite racehorse; and Shamardal, the wobbler, have been told many times, including in this publication and probably in this column. But now, with his untimely death at the relatively young age of 18, I think they are all worth telling again.

By 2003 my approach to buying yearlings was very much established. I was, and still am, a great believer in selection based on pedigree. A huge amount of work is done on the catalogue in advance to ensure that we have all the necessary information on all close relations, including ratings and distances run for all siblings of the horse for sale. If a yearling does not make the cut on pedigree, I will not look at it as I have no interest in buying it, at any price. On the other hand, if a yearling is selected in the catalogue, it will be examined and the vast majority will be followed into the sale ring, regardless of whether I think there is any chance of us being able to afford it, just in case.

At select sales, such as the Tattersalls Houghton sale where Shamardal was offered as a yearling, a large percentage fit my criteria on pedigree and so I need help to get round and view them all beforehand. Nowadays, Charlie and I divide these sales between us but, back then, I relied on my resident vet, Anthony Cosgriff, aided by two veterinary students, James Tate and Duncan Moir who is now a partner (if I am mistaken and he isn't a partner, John McVey, he should be. He has been with you long enough!) in the international veterinary group, Baker McVeigh.

Shamardal, being from the first crop of the 'Iron Horse' Giant's Causeway out of the Listed-placed mare Helsinki, who herself was a half-sister to Street Cry, of course made the cut on pedigree. He was consigned by Ted Voute and fell into the section of the sales paddocks to be examined by Duncan Moir.

He had, as far as we were aware, been sold as a foal at Keeneland for \$485,000 and should have been well outside our price range, but Duncan had 'passed' him and so, as was our policy, we met in the ring, by the rope, to watch him go through.

The auctioneer was soon asking for the minimum bid of 5,000 guineas and I was aghast. 'What on earth is wrong with this horse, Duncan?' I asked. 'Nothing', he said, and I bid the 5,000. Someone behind me bid 10,000 and Duncan and I

entered another debate about what might be wrong with the horse. I thought it should be making 50 times that but I have never believed that 'it's too cheap' is a good reason to pass on a horse that you want and I had faith in Duncan's judgement, even at that tender age.

I bid again but so did the anonymous bidder behind us. We went on like that, with Duncan and me still questioning our judgement, until, when the fellow behind had bid 50,000gns and I was about to push the boat out once more, I got a tap on the shoulder and Michael Goodbody, then manager for the late Sheikh Maktoum al Maktoum's Gainsborough Stud company, said: 'I'm buying this horse for Abdulla Buhaleeba and you'll be training it'. I closed my book and put my hands in my pockets. He was knocked down to Michael Goodbody for 50,000 Guineas.

Now Lee Mottershead of the Racing Post and Justin Felice, who led the BHA review into alleged malpractice in the sale ring, might claim that what went on between Michael Goodbody and myself amounted to collusion to prevent the vendor from getting the best price for the horse. But equally it could be said that it would be wrong for Michael and me, who both regularly bought horses for that owner, to bid against each other and over-inflate the price of the horse. And, with auction rules as they stand, the vendor, if he thought the horse was

worth more and/or that we had more to spend, could place a reserve or bid against us. He did not and we now know that he knew something about the horse which severely reduced its value and increased our risk. That was not disclosed although, as Ted Voute has

pointed out to me since, if Duncan had asked if there were any x-rays available for the horse (not common at that time), he would have found that the only x-ray was of its neck – a big clue.

Anyway, Shamardal came home to us, was broken and joined the team. I don't remember too much about him in the first half of 2004 – he didn't stand out from the crowd – apart from the fact that Joe Mercer, then racing manager to Sheikh Maktoum and his associates, specifically asked 'how's that Giants Causeway horse doing?' whenever he visited. He had obviously taken a shine to him or, more likely, to his pedigree.

I have often recalled that, following a gallop in late June or early July, Keith Dalglish said: 'The only thing that matters with this horse is, where would you like him to win? He'll win



wherever you take him'. I've said that this was particularly notable because Keith rarely said anything after gallops. I had to laugh when someone recently told me that Keith had said that I never listened to a word a rider had to say. 'I'd be opening my mouth to say something', Keith apparently said, 'but he was already walking away'. So maybe it was my fault.

We chose to take him to Ayr and I remember being nervous and getting concerned when I heard how much some of the other trainers thought of their horses. But I only get nervous when nothing but winning will do, when second would be a disappointment to me. I expected him to win and he duly did, by eight lengths.

We jumped straight to the Group 2 Vintage Stakes at Goodwood, which is a big jump for me to take with an early two-year-old but I had unprecedented faith in this horse. He won again, this time only by two and a half lengths, but with Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner Wilko in his wake.

It was only at this stage that I heard stories of him having been diagnosed as a 'wobbler' as a foal. People started coming out of the woodwork with claims that they had 'cured' him. I noted in the tributes following his death there was again reference to him having been given 'therapy that led to a miraculous recovery'. I don't know what that therapy was, but I know there was one claim from a woman who said she was sent a piece of his tail which she put in a special box and performed some voodoo on it!

I don't know whether it was a case of mis-diagnosis as a foal or whether he got better – some do – but, in the time that he was with us, he showed no hint of being a wobbler. Of course, he has died young and has apparently been unsound for a few

years but I have always understood that these problems stemmed from an injury sustained in one of his first seasons as a stallion when he was shuttling to Australia. There has been no suggestion of any neurological issues.

His last start for us was in the Dewhurst at Newmarket on a bitter-sweet day when we also won the Cesarewitch, but Mister Monet died in the Champion Stakes and hampered our other big hope, Lucky Story, as he fell. Again, he won as he liked despite the presence of Oratorio, Librettist and Champagne Stakes winner Etlala.

Shamardal left us after that to join Godolphin and Saeed bin Suroor but I, of course, followed the rest of his career closely. It was a glittering, if short, career. We have been reminded that he was beaten only once and it has been emphasised that that

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defeat came on his only start on dirt but, in my opinion, there was more that was peculiar about that race than just the surface it was run on. I was there and remember it as being run at a ridiculous pace from the outset with Shamardal, who was already labelled as a front-runner, attempting to lead from the stalls at all costs. It was won by the 33/1 outsider Blues and Royals, who never ran again. It was, to my mind, a flawed race that gave no indication of Shamardal's ability on that surface or

any other.

His record was unblemished in his next, and last, three starts and included defeat of the great Hurricane Run over a trip, 10 and a half furlongs, that was surely more to the liking of the other horse. As a sire, I saw him very much as an influence for speed and as a tremendously consistent producer of winners. He has died at a time when some of his best progeny are still running and his influence on the breed is likely to continue for quite some time. It is a huge honour to have been associated with him.

Fighting my corner

IF Shamardal hadn't died on April 16, I might just have got away without the whole [racing] world knowing that I had contracted Covid-19. At that point, when journalists started calling and I started agreeing to take their calls, I was on day 9 of isolation and day 12 since I first noted symptoms of respiratory disease. I was about to 'turn the corner'. In fact, I think I just had. I took my last dose of paracetamol, specifically for the purpose of fever control, at 4.30am that morning, although I have still been taking it occasionally since then for lingering joint and muscle pain.

Now, having read James Willoughby's piece on Bayesian Inference (page 8), I am back to wondering whether I had it at all, although I did have fairly classical symptoms, as far as we know them; I did test positive with a test that claims 95%+ accuracy; and I did, for the first time in my life, get vaccinated against influenza in November which, while far from foolproof, reduces the chances of my having had that, similar, disease.

Not having had it is my biggest concern at present as many learned commentators on the virus are suggesting that there will be a reasonable amount of immunity after first infection. If I haven't had it, I am as likely as everyone else to get it and that is pretty likely, whether we like to admit it or not. And I really don't want to go through that, or anything like it, again.

Temperature

So, for those who haven't yet experienced this disease and are still lapping up the mountain of information (and misinformation – thank you Mr Trump!) on the subject, and particularly for the hypochondriacs who are counting their coughs and taking their temperature every morning, I'll tell you what it was like for me.

On Saturday April 4 I started coughing. There was no doubt that it was a new cough and that it was reasonably persistent although, in my desperation to convince myself that I didn't have the dreaded virus, I counted the coughs and managed to decide that it didn't quite meet the definition of 'persistent' which was circulating in the media. I took my temperature several times that day and it was hovering around the 38°C mark, one degree above normal. Again, I managed to convince myself that this could not be Covid-19.

I continued with what had become 'business as usual' for

me although I, without making a point of it, extended my social distancing. I avoided people altogether where I could and otherwise I tried to turn two metres into four metres. I continued with my afternoon exercise on my bike in the belief that fresh air would help and wondered if the exercise would help 'blow it out' of me as sometimes seems to be the case with horses which develop a chronic cough and don't stop coughing until you eventually give up on all treatments and return them to fast work.

It didn't help and, after cycling on the Tuesday afternoon, I was feeling pretty awful. I managed to smash my old thermometer to bits, hitting it on my desk when trying to shake down the mercury as far as possible so that it couldn't get back up further than I wanted it to go. I called our vet John Martin and asked him to drop in one of his smart digital ones that he uses for the horses. Preferably a new one.

It registered 39.1°C and I was done with denial. I went off to bed and left Deirdre, Angus and Mikaelle to plan their isolation from me and the world outside.

I then entered a nine-day cycle of fluctuating temperature and flu-like symptoms. I had pain in my back which would build to a peak along with my rising fever and I would start to shiver and feel cold. I took paracetamol – at first well beyond guidelines on the packet and then, when I realised the potentially serious side-effects of the amount I was taking, limited myself to the maximum recommended 24-hour dose but, of course, for way beyond the recommended three days. Within 15-20 minutes the pain would subside and, within an hour, I would start to sweat to the point of saturating the bed but I would feel much better and could sleep for two to three hours. This was a four-times-a-day cycle (paracetamol every six hours) for more than a week.

I would say that, for me, it was very much like the last time I had flu, but that only lasted three or four days. I was certain, with the flu, that I was going to end up in hospital but Deirdre made the mistake of telling the doctor that my temperature was 37.9°C, when it was in fact 39.7°C, and they said that I'd be fine and should 'just keep taking the tablets'. Thankfully, I was fine.

THIS time, having had a few weeks of hearing the horror stories of the death rates in hospitals, I was determined to stay away from those places if at all possible. I did and, in the end, it subsided.

One good thing – I lost a lot of weight, but I am left with joint and muscle pain and I am hobbling around like an old man (who just said, 'he is an old man'?). I'm sure I'll get back to normal when I can get back on my bike and/or our horses can get back on the racecourse.