



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

Zero tolerance on fraud

WE have had more than a few 'slow news days' in the racing industry recently and some branches of the media have been scraping the barrel for things to cover. Even the Thoroughbred Daily News (TDN), whose tentacles stretch well beyond these shores to countries where racing has continued or already resumed, must have been feeling the pinch when Kelsey Riley called me and asked for an update on the thoughts I had expressed in January's Klarion on Justin Felice's Review Of The Buying and Selling Practices Of Bloodstock and Racehorses Within British Racing. I didn't read my January piece again before doing the interview with TDN but my views on horse sales and the auction process are well entrenched in my mind and I'm comfortable that both my January Klarion article and the TDN interview fairly reflect those, unchanged, principles.

Unscrupulous

The TDN article prompted bloodstock agent and racing manager Ed Sackville to send me a message questioning my use of the word 'agent' when I said that "when it becomes corruption is when that vendor knows what an agent is willing to pay and is running the horse up to a previously agreed price". He has a point as, for 'agent', most people will read 'bloodstock agent', just as they did in the early 1990s when I trained Beware of Agents for Brian Yeardley. I should have made it clear, as I did in January and as Justine Felice did in his report, that 'agent' includes all those conducting agency activity. Many of those acting as agents and, no doubt, some of those who have been guilty of unscrupulous practices, have been trainers. I



A bloodstock auction - part of the rich tapestry of our racing heritage

would not deny that.

TDN tried to focus on whether I had any solution to the issues of unscrupulous or corrupt practices in the buying and selling of horses. Perhaps I shirked that issue in

January and now all I can propose is a zero tolerance approach to any illegal or fraudulent activity. Purchasing or selling at auction can be one of the most exciting parts of racehorse ownership for many – anyone who witnessed Elite Racing Club's sale of Marsha for 6,000,000 guineas in 2017 could testify to that – and it is a part of the rich tapestry of racing heritage which must be preserved.

There have been countless references to the 'new normal' which will prevail when Covid-19 infection rates have settled down and it has, perhaps, become endemic. There could be major changes to the auction sales process and electronic or on-line bidding could well

become more common or even the norm. I wonder, would that be a positive or negative change for the integrity of the auction process? I fear it could, at least in the short term, be the latter.

POSTED TO THE POST

Kingsley Kickback (page 6) is unique this month in that it is dominated by letters which were sent to the Racing Post rather than to the Kingsley Klarion. They were not printed by the Racing Post and so were passed to us. I am particularly grateful to Richard Fahey for passing us the letter from Mel Roberts. I have never, as far as I am aware, met Mel and he has no connection whatsoever to our stable so I am honoured that he should take the time to write such an articulate and well-reasoned letter to the Racing Post in support of myself and Ralph Beckett.

The Racing Post can point to the fact that they have not had any letters page in their digital publication since these letters were written. For all we know they may have had an equal or greater number of letters supporting Alan Byrne and Lee Mottershead and their attacks on us. In any case, they are not obliged to print letters which are critical of their writers or their stance. It's their paper and it promotes their views above all else. That those views are so often contrary to those of racing's participants is surprising to me, considering that they are called the 'Racing' Post, but I am now well used to it.

I am rather surprised that they have not been printing letters recently as they normally fall over themselves in their attempts to get free copy. In recent years, Racing Post 'journalism', if you could call it that, has been dominated by people who phone trainers every day and ask: 'Can I have a line on your runners tomorrow?' I imagine some will have been honing their French language skills in the last couple of weeks.

Unfortunately, I think it is a Scottish trait to bear a grudge. That is why there are so many one-eyed, toothless, men in Glasgow. It is in my nature. I know it's wrong but I just can't help it so I hope they won't be stupid enough to pester me, or Charlie, with there inane requests once we're all back up and running.

Focus on resumption

IT is wonderful to have this light at the end of the tunnel and have races to aim for. I have said all along that I would support a resumption of racing in whatever shape it comes and I have tried to focus on getting racing re-started rather than get bogged down in arguments about the

shape of the new fixture list.

There are many different views on the new programme and some are, unfortunately, laced with more than a dash of self-interest. No doubt there will be things that frustrate me to a point where I am driven to complain but, for the moment, I'm going to try to

just get on with it and hope that things, particularly on the prize-money front, improve quickly.

I have, of course, noted the different approaches to foreign runners in France, Ireland, Germany and Britain. Some feel quite strongly that we should not be so welcoming to the foreign runners for our Group races (Group 1 races initially and then all Pattern races) when they are not reciprocating. Germany interestingly reversed its

initial plans to accept foreign runners and, unlike the others, made no pretence about this decision being based on biosecurity concerns.

Reciprocated

They simply stated that they would not welcome runners from countries who would not welcome them and that, if Britain, France and Ireland were to change their policies, then Germany

would also change. Fair enough, or almost fair enough as they should surely have reciprocated the British position on Pattern races.

This got me to thinking about the Group 1 races being run in France and Ireland with only domestic runners. Should they be able to retain their Group 1 status this year if they are not open competitions? Personally, I think not.

Elite competition, at the pinnacle of

any sport, should be unrestricted and open to all or, at least, all who can demonstrate sufficient ability. This is a simple and accepted principle in most sport and many, such as golf and tennis, designate their elite competitions as 'Opens'. The same should surely apply in racing and, if France, Ireland or any country feels compelled to introduce restrictions for their top races then they should drop the international Group 1 tag.