Mark Johnston's Straight Talking

More fragile, or better diagnosis?

ARE racehorses more fragile than they used to be and, if so, is it down to inbreeding? The question was posed to me a couple of weeks ago by an owner who has been in the sport for longer than I have and clearly feels that they are, and it is.

It is a subject that is regularly raised and one that has probably been covered in this publication and even this column before, but I am sure it is worth revisiting. I can't give you any definitive answers – all I have is my own theories and anecdotal evidence – but the debate is interesting, if nothing else, and may provide inspiration for future veterinary pieces from our vets John and Becky or letters to 'Kickback'.

Indeed, this month John tells us about fractured pelvises, and the regularity with which these injuries are now diagnosed might lead many to think that horses are more fragile than they were in the past. But first we should consider whether these injuries are actually occurring more often than they used to or are just being diagnosed more often than they used to be.

Vet Becky Dinsdale scans a horse's pelvis at Kingsley Park

If it could be shown that they are in fact occurring more than, say, 30 years ago, I would not be altogether surprised and I would not assume that any increased fragility was confirmed by this. Racehorses, I believe, go faster than they did 30 years ago and train harder in an attempt to be fitter for more competitive races. This, inevitably, exposes them to a greater risk of injury as is the case in all athletes as they advance and go faster or hit harder. If we were breeding them, principally, for soundness (i.e. choosing our breeding stock from those that suffered the fewest injuries) we would rapidly achieve a much sounder, much slower, breed of horse. But, as Tesio said, 'not the Thoroughbred'.

But, in any case, I am convinced that the apparent rise in the frequency of pelvic fractures is largely down to better diagnosis. In the short time that I was in veterinary practice, between 1983 and 1987, I saw very few confirmed fractured pelvises and those I did see were probably confirmed post-mortem.

But that does not mean that the undisplaced and stress fractures were not occurring just as regularly as they are now. They could not be diagnosed with the imaging techniques available to us at the time. It was the heyday of the, mostly unqualified, equine physiotherapist or the 'back man' or 'back woman' as they were commonly known at the time.

They tended to have their pet ailments which they diagnosed time after time and, when I was in practice at Yarm, not too far from Middleham, the 'back woman' used to invariably diagnose sacroiliac ligament strain in horses which were lame behind and had some pain on palpation of their rump or an indication of flattening of the musculature.

In hindsight, she wasn't too far wrong and at least had the right region, the sacroiliac ligament being a ligament providing the principal bond of union between the sacrum and the ilium in the pelvis, and the ilium being the bone which we now know to be commonly fractured. These horses were rested until sound, slowly brought back to full work, and many got away with it.

Many other fractures and soft-tissue injuries can now be accurately diagnosed whereas, in the not-too-distant past, the cause of lameness was unknown and the treatment of choice was often confinement to box until sound. And, dare I say, the, to my mind quite reasonable, demands of the modern owner to be kept properly informed about all aspects of their horse's care means that they are immediately informed about ailments, whereas in the past trainers might have operated by the old adage that 'owners are like mushrooms: keep them in the dark and feed them plenty of sh*t'.

I realised from the outset that, to quote another old adage, that approach would be 'a rapid route to the poor house' and so it has always been our policy to inform owners of every setback and to offer in-depth investigation of problems, second opinions, and treatment as part of our daily rate.

So, better diagnosis and better reporting might be blamed for the impression that injuries are occurring more often and that this might be due to weakness in the breed but, nonetheless, it is worth considering that the horse of today might not be as robust as in the past and it is surely worth considering whether modern practices might be contributing to this or may do so in future.

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It is arguable that there is a greater degree of inbreeding as stallion 'books' have increased from the traditional 40 to in excess of 150 per annum and this must surely have decreased the gene pool, but I can't, with my basic knowledge of genetics and selective breeding, see that this would necessarily lead to fragility. I can, on the other hand, see that less strenuous testing of our breeding stock, by retiring horses to stud younger or after fewer races, and considering a filly to be more valuable for breeding if she is unraced than if she is unplaced, could rapidly lead to fragility, and both practices are becoming increasingly common.

IT is also often suggested that the American thoroughbred is not as sound as it used to be and many would like to suggest that this is down to their continued use of anti-inflammatory drugs in racing. I would argue that it has nothing to do with drugs as these drugs were already commonly used in the 1960s and 70s when the American thoroughbred was renowned for its toughness.

I suggest that increasing fragility is more likely to be due to the modern quest for 'perfect' conformation and 'clean' x-rays at the sales and the inordinate amount of surgery that US-bred young stock undergo in their first year of life. I do not necessarily believe that it is the surgery itself which is doing the damage, but the restricted exercise and confinement to stables at a time when they need to be running in order to develop their skeleton can only be harmful. Sadly, some of these practices are working their way into European yearling production as well and we would do well to recognise the importance of strong limbs as opposed to 'correct' limbs.

IN conclusion, I have to say that I don't actually know if the thoroughbred breed is stronger or weaker than it was 30 years ago, but I am certain that we should be considering the possibility that some of our modern practices, including many of those undertaken in the mistaken belief that they will produce a sounder horse, might have long-term negative effects.

We need to think about the basic principles of selective breeding for racing by breeding from those which prove themselves best at racing, and best at racing repeatedly, not just once or twice, and then let nature take its course.

SIMPLICITY ITSELF

THIS month James Willoughby gives us an interesting and entertaining example of the benefit of challenging accepted practices in sport and points out that objective assessment of the facts often results in a simpler rather than more complicated approach. I think perhaps, for me, the first horseracing 'norm' which I challenged, and which I believe gave me a significant advantage, was the idea that a horse sitting towards the rear of a field is somehow conserving energy by doing so.

Surely, after the first 100 yards or so, in which the horses settle down into their positions, if horse A is sitting 10 lengths behind horse B, and doesn't get further and further behind, they are travelling at exactly the same speed.

It really is that simple and yet the belief that horses at the back of the field are using less energy is still commonplace. It is still the accepted norm.