Mark Johnston’s

Going racing . . . at Le Bourget

Any extraordinary things have happened in racing, and in all walks of life this year, and perhaps, for me, the most surreal situation was my having two Group 1 winners in 24 hours and not being on track for either of them. It isn’t the first time that I have had to watch one of our horses winning a Group 1 on television – I watched Jukebox Jury win the Irish St Leger from Keeneland sales, for one – but, if I wasn’t there, Deirdre invariably was.

I think I probably have gone racing over the last 30 years more than any other British trainer. We have always had the policy that, if the owner is taking the trouble to go, I myself, Deirdre or, more recently, Charlie should also try to make the effort. Our presence on track certainly isn’t a good guide to the horses’ chances of winning. As many would like to suggest – we can’t make them run any faster – but, if anything, it can be important to be there and share the owner’s disappointment in defeat. We also try to be there for the biggest races, especially if they are televised, as we know the media expect it and we see it as a courtesy to sponsors and others who are putting on the day.

But, as we have come to accept, Covid-19 has changed everything in 2020. Very few owners are going racing and, when they do, we have very little contact with them. There is nowhere near the same expectation for us to attend but, despite this, I am still going racing more than most trainers.

However, the logistics of getting to France for Gear Up’s and Subjectivist’s races proved to be just too much for me. The Elite Sportsman programme, which allows athletes and their support teams to travel abroad without quarantine on return, has been a great help and it allowed Joe Fanning to ride Subjectivist but, to comply, you must return to the UK on the same day and, for the next week, you can only attend competitions and training. Otherwise, you must self-isolate.

That meant that I would have to travel to France two days’ running – not an insurmountable problem – and that could not attend the following week’s Horses In Training sales where we had 50 horses to sell. I decided that I could not go and that it would be down to Robynne Watton and David Hickin to prepare the horses – and collect the trophies.

The highlight of the sales for me was lot 1134 in the Tattersalls October Book 2 sales, the filly by Ulysses out of Reckoning, a half-sister to Sir Ron Priestley, whom we bought last year for €260,000. I make no secret of the fact that I give almost no instructions to jockeys. My objective is to win races and I think that instructions on where to place the horse relative to others would be counter-productive to say the least.

I have never told a jockey whether to drop in, drop out or make the running. For many years, the horse, if it holds its position, is travelling at approximately the same speed as the leader. And, at least, both jockey and horse have something up ahead to aim at and judge their pace by. This is a very common practice and I have often said, and truly believe, that one of the reasons why we have so many front-runners is that, as a rider is commonly the only one in the race who has not been told to get a lead.

Telling a jockey to ‘make the running’ would, on the other hand, surely be close to suicidal. If there was more than one horse in a race whose rider had such an instruction, they would be going flat out from the start. I think this is a pretty rare occurrence, but it is nonetheless a bit concerning that the BHA and/or the NTF might consider this to be a reasonable instruction to give to a jockey.

And what about ‘drop out’? Is that a reasonable thing to tell your rider to do if the objective is to obtain the best possible placing?

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Dare I say I almost relish the day that an official calls my name at the meeting, to partner Gear Up. But I thought it was particularly important for Subjectivist to have Joe Fanning and so decided to take him in our plane. Difficulties in finding a jockey when they do, we have very little contact with them. There is nowhere near the same expectation for us to attend but, despite this, I am still going racing more than most trainers.

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