



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

Going racing . . . at Le Bourget

MANY 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 other 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 I 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.

THOSE attending under the Elite Sportsman programme are not allowed to travel on a scheduled flight and so we opted to allow James Doyle, who already planned to be riding 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 securing a suitable pilot meant that I had to go along myself and so I watched the race on my phone in a waiting room at Le Bourget airport. There was probably just about the same atmosphere as at ParisLongchamp.

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 our rider is quite 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?

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.

Dare I say I almost relish the day that an official calls my policy, that has proved to be so successful, into question. If they do, they had better have some pretty good evidence to support any suggestion that it is the wrong approach as I have 4,646 examples of it working.

Ready for the Reckoning

OUR yearling sales season is almost over. There is just the one-day Tattersalls December Yearling Sale, held on November 23 – more racing logic for you – still to come.

We bought 47 yearlings – well down on last year and at a considerably lower average price – but it could have been worse. None of us knew what to expect. We can only hope now that our owner-breeders and those who have bought themselves, or through agents, send as many as last year.

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, Subjectivist, and Alpha Rose. I wanted her for obvious reasons and I was willing to push the boat out a good bit further than I had done for her siblings. I knew I could go to, at least, 100,000 guineas for Subjectivist's owner, Dr Jim Walker, but I trudged on well past that limit and eventually gave way when Jane Chapple-Hyam bid 140,000 guineas. I was bitterly disappointed and frustrated that, despite all our success with the family, I had missed out on the next one.

So, imagine my delight when, minutes later I was approached by consignor Peter Stanley and breeder Susan Hearn to say that the filly had been bought in and that Mrs Hearn would like me to train her.

We now have four of Reckoning's offspring in the yard at the same time and huge ambitions for them in 2021.



Sir Ron Priestley

EXPERIENCE OVER INSTRUCTIONS

IN 2016 the National Trainers Federation conducted a number of seminars with barrister Roderick Moore on running and riding rules, with particular emphasis on the need for trainers to give adequate instructions. Last month, in one of their Weekly Update newsletters, they sought to remind us of this and reiterate the need for instructions to be given to jockeys if trainers are to avoid falling foul of the rules.

It appears to me that the rules on what constitutes 'adequate instructions' are quite vague but the NTF say that, from their experience in representing trainers at enquiries, they would advise that 'instructions need to cover whether to drop in, drop out or make the running, and where the horse should be asked to make its main effort'.

Well, as the Klarion went to press, I think I have trained 4,646 winners from, I presume, in excess of 25,000 runners and I can honestly say that I have never told a jockey whether to drop in, drop out or make the running and I have never told him or her when the horse should be asked to make its main effort. Have I trained all those winners despite giving inadequate instructions? Or might there be, at least, an element of my having trained some of these winners because I recognised from the outset of my training career that instructions of this type defy all logic?

I know that many very successful trainers and a large number of owners, with varying levels of experience and success, do regularly tell jockeys to 'drop in' or 'get a lead' and it is clear that not too much harm usually comes of it as

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