



Mark Johnston's

I AM SURE that anyone who has taken more than a passing interest in horseracing at any time in the last 30 years will appreciate what Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum has contributed to British racing, and will understand what a blow his death is to everyone associated with the sport and, in particular, to those of us who have had the pleasure of training or riding his horses.

Long before his acquisition of Bandari brought us his patronage in 2002, I was a follower of his Shadwell team. Who could fail but to be captivated by the exploits of the mighty Dayjur, especially on his final start when jumping the shadow and going down by a neck at Belmont Park? He was a beautifully bred horse, by Danzig, and I am sure I was not alone in thinking that he would be a great influence on the breed when he went to stud. I was so excited to receive a filly by Dayjur to train for Sheikh Mohammed in the first draft of four yearlings that he sent us at the end of 1993, even if it would be 10 years until I trained a filly (Attraction) with more 'notable' front legs. Despite her forelimb conformation, Millstream won three Group 3 races for us, was placed twice at Group 2 level, and, in acquiring an official rating of 110, proved to be one of best progeny of her, sadly, disappointing sire's stud career.

In 1994 it was Sheikh Hamdan's Erhaab that lowered the colours of Mister Baileys in the Dante and the Derby and I have often told the story of how the then four-year-old Charlie learned to read the words 'Carson' and 'Hills' when picking out Sheikh Hamdan's colours on the back page of the Racing Post. He would scan the back page, where the day's cards were shown in colour, for our owners' colours and predict, largely on field size, which races we were going to win. But if he spotted that we were up against one of Sheikh Hamdan's he would be likely to exclaim 'oh, oh, Willie Carson!' and Deirdre or I would sometimes have to explain 'no, Charlie, it's Richard Hills. H-I-L-L-S. Hills'.

Despite failing to win a Group 1 race for us, it could be

Sad loss of owner who gave so much to British racing

argued that Bandari was the best horse I trained for Sheikh Hamdan. He won twice at Group 2 level, he achieved a peak official rating of 122 after finishing third in the St Leger at the end of his 3yo campaign, and he holds a special place in my heart having won the Hardwicke during Royal Ascot at York in 2005.

A WZAAN was unbeaten for us as a two-year-old and ended that season with a Group 1 win in the Middle Park at Newmarket with Sheikh Hamdan in attendance, so that was a very special day for us but, nonetheless, when I think of Sheikh Hamdan in years to come, I think I will always think first of Elarqam. If it were not for Sheikh Hamdan, I am sure I would never, otherwise, have had the opportunity to train such a good-looking son of Frankel and Attraction. Sheikh Hamdan is, to date, the only owner to have sent me a seven-figure purchase to train and he did it twice: Elarqam and his younger brother Maydanny.

Elarqam, having won at listed, Group 3 and Group 2 level and having been placed third in the Group 1 Juddmonte International and fourth in the 2,000 Guineas, retired to stud in

Straight Talking



The late Sheikh Hamdan's Elarqam

France this year. Maydanny remains with us and will run, for now, under the Shadwell Stud banner. Sadly, whatever he does, it can never be the same with neither owner nor breeder here to see him run.

I CAN SEE the recent redistribution of prize-money, widely condemned in the industry, from both perspectives.

For many years I argued that horseracing was the only professional sport where the losers don't get paid and, if so many others are making money out of a horserace, it is ludicrous to expect the participants to pay to put on the show. I also argued that, if racecourses and the betting industry are so obsessed with getting a minimum of eight runners, so that they can make more money out of a race, they should pay for eight places; and that, if the BHA and, in particular, their handicappers, want to insist that horses are driven out to obtain the best possible position, there should be some financial incentive for doing so.

These are all arguments for paying prize-money down to, at least, eighth place and/or some form of appearance money but, in a country where prize-money at all levels is so pitifully inadequate, any reduction in the winner's income is unacceptable.

UNACCEPTABLE

It is particularly notable that many, if not most, of the complaints have come from people considered to be 'small' owners or trainers and refer to the lowest grade races. It shows that, for all owners of racehorses, racing is about winning and everyone agrees that, above all else, the winner should be adequately rewarded before any other.

WHAT'S more, this hammers home the fact that racehorse owners are not going to be lured by the promise of an extra £100 or so towards the expense of training and racing a horse or a free lunch; they want some chance of getting a meaningful return and a first prize that isn't another reminder that they are being taken for

Top man Bobby

ON THE one hand it could be argued that my memory of jockeys and riders from my early days as a trainer is clouded by nostalgia and that I judge their performances and abilities through a pair of rose-coloured spectacles. But, on the other hand, I now have more than 30 years of working with horses and jockeys of the highest calibre. I have witnessed, first hand, horseracing's greatest athletes, human and equine, at work.



Bobby Elliott

STILL, when it comes to sheer horsemanship, I rate Bobby Elliott as the best rider I have seen atop a racehorse. His riding skills, particularly on a difficult horse, were a joy to watch. Deirdre always said it was as if there was a post coming out of the horse's back and running up his spine, like the toy horses she played with as a child, attaching him to the horse and making the pair act as one.

During my first few years in Middleham, when I was taking unraced horses for stalls practice, I didn't have a team of handlers spare to take with me. The riders would be expected to ride the horse into the stalls and I would close the gates behind. If one wouldn't go in, it wasn't a case of whether we could use two pushers or four, because I had none. I just swapped the rider and Bobby rode it in.

I AM told that he learned his trade in the toughest of schools, with Tom Masson at Epsom, and that methods were used which would not be considered acceptable today. I have it on very good authority that he would be tied on to horses with a long riding mac to hide the rope joining his feet under the horse's belly. It seems, when the rope was removed, the rider had learned to maintain his position without it and Deirdre's analogy of the post attaching rider to horse was not too far from the way Bobby learned.

Maybe this explains why I have never seen another rider like him and probably never will.