



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## THE PRESSURE IS ON

**I**T IS a long time since a horse of ours has received the number of plaudits that were heaped on Subjectivist following his win in the Gold Cup at Royal Ascot, and so it is fitting that coverage of that race should dominate this issue of the Klarion.

Of course, it is understandable that some writers in the racing press chose to focus on the defeat of Stradivarius and the fact that his attempt to reel in Subjectivist was checked. Stradivarius was odd-on favourite and he was seeking a record-equalling fourth win in the race, so it can be assumed that many more people wanted to see him win than there were supporting Subjectivist. So the reception that Subjectivist received and the overwhelmingly positive media coverage was all the more gratifying.

Some of that was, most certainly, down to the popularity of his rider, Joe Fanning, but this was not Joe's first Group 1 win and not even his first on this horse. And, when he won the Middle Park on The Last Lion, he was lowering the colours of none other than Blue Point with an enterprising ride. The public reaction to that was muted by comparison.

I think the difference this time was that most informed observers thought they had seen something quite special. They had witnessed a demolition job on a field jam-packed with staying talent by an extremely talented young horse, executed with precision by the most underrated jockey in the weighing room. It was a really great race to watch, even for some of those defeated, as was confirmed by Anthony Mullins, trainer of runner-up Princess Zoe, whose praise of

Subjectivist could not have been more effusive.

To be fair to Subjectivist, this was not the first time that he had demonstrated a spark of brilliance. His Dubai Gold Cup win was also a joy to watch. He broke the track record with ease and was clearly in a class of his own that night.

Now the pressure is really on. I have always said that the only time I get nervous before a race is when I truly believe that I have the best horse and nothing but winning will do – when second will be a major disappointment. That really doesn't happen very often.

**O**N June 17 Subjectivist was the best horse in the Gold Cup field and that field arguably contained most, if not all, of the best stayers in the world. Our job now is to produce him to run to the same form next time and, if we can do so, we have no reason to fear any horse.



Princess Anne made the Gold Cup presentations to winning connections

The pressure, therefore, is on me and my team to produce him in the same condition as the most likely thing to beat Subjectivist next time out is a failure to run up to his best.

## Objectivist

**I**N HIS piece on Subjectivist on page 12 James Willoughby describes an aspect of race analysis that I have long recognised but described differently.

I often tell owners who are disappointed by their horse's run, based on it having finished towards the rear, that, once beaten, finishing position is irrelevant. By this I mean that if you take on the winner head to head in a battle two furlongs out and come off worst, you could be the second-best horse on the day and finish tenth because you 'shot your bolt' a long way out and ran the last furlong or two on 'empty'.

James says: 'People talk about winning distances for the entire race distance, when even sections of a race as short as a furlong are not fine enough. What horses do in a race is throw bursts of speed against one another; when a horse is stressed by one or more of these beyond the rate at which it can transform energy to locomotion, it starts to weaken.'

'This is imperceptible to begin with – except that it is felt by the horse. The distances between horses at the end of the race are merely artefacts of the exchanges which occur a long time before then.'

I think we are describing the same phenomenon but he, as usual, with his analytical brain, has dissected it into the smallest of component parts.

I often deny claims that our horses are, as a group, tougher than everyone else's or that there is something in the way we train that makes our horses tougher to pass. I explain that, due to the fact we aim to run our race at close to an even pace throughout, if a challenger makes a supreme effort to accelerate from behind us and gets past, it pays a price for the effort it has made and slows down faster than our horse, giving the impression that our horse is fighting back.

But, taking James's hypothesis, this depends on our horse having the energy to maintain its pace in the face of this challenge. If our horse cannot face the challenge, we are beaten. If we are beaten a long way before the line, it is now our horse that is decelerating most and we will be beaten a long way.

**T**HIS may go some way to explain another characteristic that is often attributed, probably wrongly, to our team and that is that our horses have some unique ability to bounce back quickly from a bad run and win. I usually say that this is simply because we are willing to run again as soon as we have established that there is nothing wrong with the horse, whereas most owners and trainers seem to work on the premise that the best cure for running below expectations is a break. There is nothing surer than that you can't win if you don't run. However, it may also in part be down to the fact that I have long recognised that finishing position, especially when not involved in the placings, can be a poor indicator of ability or even current form.

This might also go some way towards explaining why I get so upset with the stewards asking for an explanation immediately after a race as to why a horse has run poorly or, inexplicably, run well, when their expectations are based entirely on the assumption that finishing position should correlate with the betting market. They make no attempt whatsoever to analyse the performance beyond the odds. It insults my intelligence and perpetuates the belief that trainers are privy to information which explains, and might even predict, the result.

**F**OR JUST about as long as I have been training horses, part of the administrative role in our office and, I suspect, in most trainers' offices throughout the country, has been to find out, as best we can, which owners are attending which races.

We do this so that I can attend the most appropriate meeting – I do not, as the media would have you believe, go where I think I am most likely to have a winner – and so that we can assist with arrangements if owners require us to do so. This, most often, entails assistance with booking badges and trying to ensure that owners get the number of entrance tickets that they require. We make no secret of the fact that, to do this, we regularly broker the 'swapping' of badges so that an owner who requires more than the racecourse has allocated for their horse can use badges from owners who are not attending or using their badges.

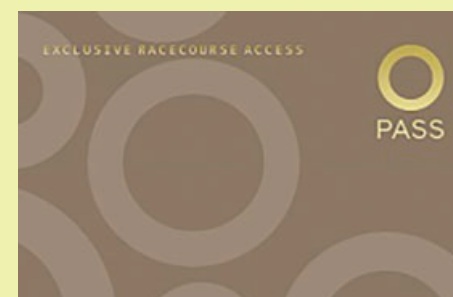
For many years we confirmed the arrangements by fax and then in more recent years by email. This didn't always go smoothly, especially if the racecourse didn't bother to read the memo we sent or made no effort to establish that the person asking for the badge was the person we had listed. There have even been some blatant attempts to fraudulently obtain badges for big meetings. One scammer acquired a copy of our headed paper and incorporated it into a fax in an attempt to obtain Royal Ascot badges, but the branding was old

## PASS . . . or fail

and the racecourse staff were immediately on to it.

Generally the system worked very well and most racecourses employed competent people on the gates, including a freelance group who covered northern tracks including Chester and York, who got to know trainers' secretaries and regularly attending owners.

I make no apology for facilitating this swapping of badges as I would estimate that we were still averaging fewer than 1.5 owners' badges per runner. But somewhere along the line the racecourses or their representative body the RCA, decided that trainers should



A PASS pass

be removed from this process, presumably to reduce the number of badges allocated, and in 2016 they introduced the Privilege Access Swipe System (PASS). For a considerable time most racecourses operated both systems and were happy to accept instructions from trainers on who should receive badges but, more recently, particularly under the guise of Covid compliance, the RCA and Weatherbys (who operate the system) are seeking to tighten their protocols and exclude trainers from the equation altogether.

**A**CCORDING to David Armstrong of the RCA: 'The basic premise from the introduction of PASS is that the attendance by an owner is a direct relationship between the racecourse and that owner.' Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that statement is implying, 'and excludes the trainer'. Is that right? Not from where I'm sitting.

No owner has a runner without it having a trainer, and that trainer invariably makes the entries and the declarations with authority from the owner to do so. Someone, somewhere along the line, has, yet again, totally lost sight of the cost of training and racing horses and has, more specifically, lost sight of the cost of entries' fees -- most of which don't even result in a runner, let alone an owner attending.