



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## The darker side of Panorama

ON MAY 23 I wrote on our website that I believed Martin Bashir was being made a scapegoat by the BBC and I suggested that his brand of journalism was commonplace in the corporation and on the Panorama team in particular. I said I now wondered how many times in the past I had been taken in and that it was only when some documentaries focused on horseracing and I had some inside knowledge that I realised how sensationalist and inaccurate many television documentaries are.

On July 19 we saw yet another sensationalist documentary from Panorama titled 'The Dark Side of Horseracing'. It made me very angry. It was not, as advertised, an exposé of horse racing, it was an exposé of illegal and unacceptable practices in a single abattoir, Drury and Sons, but it was nonetheless upsetting for anyone who works with or cares for horses.

Most people who watched this programme will have been appalled at the scenes from the abattoir and I found them abhorrent, but I did not find these scenes objectionable because they featured horses that had once raced. In fact, I

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had no way of telling that the horses shown were retired racehorses and I would consider these practices to be equally unacceptable if the animal in question was a thoroughbred, a shire, or a Shetland pony. It surely says a lot about the producers of the documentary and the supplier of the video footage that they focused almost entirely on what a small number of the horses had done previously and who

had owned or trained them rather than on the welfare issues that they had unearthed. Is one horse's pain and suffering more important than another's because of the public profile of a previous owner?

Animal Aid openly state that they filmed inside that

abattoir between October 2019 and February 2020 but it seems that they did nothing to put a stop to what was going on and preferred to wait 17 months until Panorama aired their footage. Why? How many horses and ponies have suffered since? Are Drury and Sons still slaughtering horses and applying the same welfare standards while Panorama and Animal Aid attack horseracing?

Drury and Sons were found guilty in October 2020 of

I FOUND SOME scenes on Panorama in which horses were being shot with a rifle to be so incredible as to be almost unbelievable and, I admit, it even crossed my mind that they might have been staged. I just couldn't imagine anyone being so stupid as to use a firearm of that type in that situation or being willing to hold the horse or even stand in the same room. The danger to the people involved is so blatantly obvious.

I put this to Chris Cook of the Racing Post and it seems he questioned Drury and Sons on this and that they acknowledged that a rifle is used and claimed that 'its long barrel gives greater certainty as to the direction in which the bullet would travel, more than a pistol with its relatively short barrel'. Nonsense.

### UNACCEPTABLE

You don't have to be an expert on firearms to know that a rifle is not designed to be used in one hand, as we saw in the film, and that to do so is extremely dangerous. I do hold a firearm certificate and own a humane killer pistol specially designed for euthanasia of horses, although I have not had occasion to need to use it in more than 10 years. It is purposefully small so that it can be used in one hand, leaving the other hand free to hold the horse and thus ensuring that no other person need stand in, or close to, the line of fire. The end of the barrel is angled to ensure the correct direction of travel and the barrel is

vented, because to place the barrel of a rifle or other firearm against a solid object and fire can, it itself, be very dangerous.

Is short, the firearms we saw in the film are not designed to be used in that way and, I believe, a licence application, if it had stated where they were to be used and for what purpose, should not have been successful. I would have expected the police to have confiscated those firearms and revoked the licence immediately on seeing how they were being used.

I HAVE seen online petitions calling for the closure of Drury and Sons. It is inconceivable to me that they could still be operating following the exposure of so many unacceptable practices.

animal welfare offences in relation to a mare that arrived in an obviously injured state and struggled to stand or walk but received no treatment until the following day. That prosecution was brought by Wiltshire Council and, if Animal Aid or Panorama provided any evidence for the prosecution they have not said so, but the Food Standards Agency, which is responsible for the licensing and regulation of abattoirs, issued a statement saying that they have asked Panorama to provide the footage, 17 months after Animal Aid obtained it.

If any individual or organisation has footage of animals being abused, serious breaches of animal welfare regulations, and evidence of disregard for the safety and welfare of humans and animals alike, do they not have a duty to take that evidence to the police, the RSPCA, the Health and Safety Executive or, in the case of an abattoir, the FSA? What type of individual or organisation waits more than a year and prefers to use it in a Panorama documentary targeted against horseracing?

FOR me, there were far too many people featured in this programme, and commenting on it afterwards, who were willing to use the plight of these animals to further their own ends and that, unfortunately, included some who are involved in charities aimed at the care and training of ex-racehorses. So often I have to ask myself why so many individuals, charities and other organisations choose to focus on what they like to label as the 'plight' of ex-racehorses rather than far more common equine welfare issues. I can only imagine it is that they see more money or, in the case of Animal Aid and Panorama, more publicity in it, for themselves.

### Dealing with the abusers

I WAS absolutely delighted to hear that police had arrested four people in connection with racial abuse of England footballers on social media. I haven't heard whether anyone has been charged but it is nonetheless encouraging to see that the police can act so quickly and efficiently in these circumstances.

This does, however, make me wonder what is happening in the case of the jockey Saffie Osborne. She was threatened with extreme violence, including rape. Jamie

### NEW HAT, OLD LABEL

ZIMBABWEAN champion jockey, Rodgers Satombo, might be disappointed to hear that his new helmet (see page 24) has not been worn by Joe Fanning or anyone else. The helmets we recently sent to Zimbabwe were only 'second-hand' in that they were sitting on the shelf at Johnston Racing and were valueless to us as they did not meet the current, PAS: 015 2011, standard required under BHA rules.

Way back in 1993 I visited Ascot racecourse – the one in Bulawayo, not the one in Berkshire – and could not help but notice that some of the riders were wearing ill-fitting helmets tied on with bailer twine. I never forgot this and so, 28 years later it occurred to me that our 23 'obsolete' helmets, which once had a considerable value, might be greatly appreciated in Zimbabwe.

This is not to say for one minute that African heads are any less precious than British heads or that they should be expected to use sub-standard equipment, but I was confident that these helmets were of the same standard as those currently in use here and are only unacceptable due to typical British bureaucracy.

HERE at Johnston Racing we provide helmets for our staff and we have them made by Champion, a renowned manufacturer, in blue to distinguish them from ones that might be bought in the shops. Back in 2017 the regulations were changed and the EN 1384, 2012, standard was deemed no longer to be acceptable. As it happened, soon after that, one of our riders who had purchased her own new helmet showed us that the PAS: 015 2011 label was coming off to reveal the old EN 1384 2012 label underneath! The latest helmets are identical but have been re-labelled.

Champion declined our request to have the helmets re-labelled but my Scottish thriftiness would not allow me to throw them out and it took me four years to think of a use for them. I am delighted that they have found a new home.

Osborne traced the man who had sent the threats and it then transpired that the same person has been sending messages to other jockeys including abominable threats of violence and even incitement to commit suicide. As I understand it, he hasn't been arrested yet.

We haven't been told what was in the messages sent to the footballers, and it is probably quite right that this sort of abuse should not be further distributed, but I am finding it very difficult to imagine what could be any worse than the messages I have seen which were sent to Saffie Osborne and other jockeys. Why hasn't the perpetrator been arrested?