



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

CAUGHT SPEEDING

I THINK IT was Luca Cumani who said: 'The only time that matters, is time spent in jail'. He was referring to the practice of 'clocking' gallops, as they commonly do in the United States, and I agree with him.

We are training animals that can, and will, push themselves to limits that would be unimaginable to any human athlete and so our training must always be controlled to ensure that the horses do enough to get fit without taking unnecessary risk. We save 'flat out' for the racetrack and so, with all horses working well within their limits, I have never seen the benefit of knowing what speed, or time, the horse can achieve when under restraint or, at least, not encouraged to make maximum effort.

It seems we are in an age when people are obsessed with gathering data for data's sake. I am constantly bombarded by offers to sell me gadgets for measuring heart rates, stride length, speed, acceleration, deceleration, countless other parameters, and software to analyse it all. There is equipment available now to measure all sorts of things, but these purveyors of

horseracing's brand of alchemy never tell me what I am supposed to do with this data. If the time isn't quite what I'd like it to be, or what the gadget tells me I ought to like it to be, what, exactly, am I going to do about it? How will we convert data into more winners or better performances from our horses?

However, as I have said, it is important that the exercise is controlled and this requires a good deal of skill and experience from the riders. Our cantering exercise is generally done in 'strings', pairs or small 'upsides' groups and the more experienced riders set the pace. But a good deal of care and attention is required from all riders. As we know from driving cars, it is all too easy to go with the flow and allow those in front to set the pace, even if this is well in excess of the speed limit. We feel almost immune, or at least protected, from prosecution if there are a number of cars in front of us travelling at the same speed.

A similar situation can arise on the gallops and we sometimes see riders trying to 'lay up' with a leader that is too keen and going faster than its rider would wish. Or making up ground after

getting left behind when jumping off. When watching the horses exercise we are looking for horses which are struggling, 'off the bridle', or simply going too fast or too slow. Experience has told us that a comfortable pace for our canterers is usually at an average of between 28 and 30 miles per hour and, for a few years now, we have had a number of riders, but nowhere near all of them, wear GPS watches so that, when we see something that looks wrong, we can refer to the speed log from the watch and change riders or lead horses to try to get things back under control.

BUT this is all retrospective and, dare I say, a bit hit and miss. So some bright spark came up with the idea of us having a speed trap on the gallops and that is what we have done. Now each and every rider can see, at a



The speed trap at Kingsley Park

glance, what speed they are doing at, what we know to be, the fastest part of the gallop. It has immediately improved the consistency of the work and it is, of course, very educational for the less experienced riders. Every day they get the Johnston Racing version of a speed awareness course.

No doubt it was a bit of a shock to the riders on the first day when they realised that they could be caught speeding at, as well as on the way to, work.

WHILE IT is accepted that there are countless different approaches to buying yearlings at the sales, there is no denying that the pedigree, as displayed in the catalogue — particularly the performance of parents and siblings — has a very significant bearing on value. Vendors know this and are constantly plugging their wares with announcements of recent updates and excuses for deficiencies.

I am well used to it, but one vendor's proclamation of achievement for his breeding at the recent Tattersalls Book 3 sale was a new one to me and made me smile. As I was viewing his yearling he

told me: 'The two-year-old out of the mare has been named now, and it was placed second in a barrier [stalls] trial at Dundalk last week'.

I couldn't help but reply: 'I have many two-year-olds that have won barrier trials at home'.



London-centric

THE DEBATE on whether racing's administrators need to be based in hugely expensive premises in central London has rumbled on for almost as long as I have been a trainer. I am almost sure that, at one stage, someone dared to suggest that they were able to recruit 'better' people by being based in London but such a statement seems so inconceivable in this day and age that I am beginning to doubt my own memory.

So why are they based there? Their

integrity department has a whole floor in the High Holborn office with people studying screens displaying racing and betting markets. Similar IT hubs in other industries might be, somewhat controversially perhaps, based in India, Gibraltar or wherever it was cheapest but surely not in central London.

Now, like so many other office-based organisations, under the guise of Covid-prevention, they have had large numbers of staff working from home for the past 18 months or so. How many, I wonder? If they can work efficiently from home, could they work efficiently from Newmarket, Milton Keynes or York?

Testing a necessity

JOHN GOSDEN was recently fined £500 by the BHA's disciplinary panel and the filly, Franconia, was disqualified for testing positive for Ketamine after her win in a Listed race at Newbury in June 2020. The panel decided that the positive test was probably as a result of cross-contamination from the filly's groom, who admitted using the drug.

The panel accepted that John Gosden had taken precautions to avoid such an eventuality but they claimed he could have done more. I don't believe we have yet been told what more they felt he should have done but it would surely be helpful for all trainers to know. They fined him £500, which is apparently an unusually low fine for such a breach of the rules, but, of course, connections lost more than £17,000 in prize-money and, had Franconia not subsequently won another Listed race, the effect on her breeding value could have run to hundreds of thousands of pounds.

I imagine that, had the BHA not softened their stance on absolute trainer liability in positive 'dope' tests following the 2017 case involving Hughie Morrison, the consequences for John Gosden could have been much more severe but this is, nonetheless, a very serious case and should be taken as a warning for the whole industry.

FOLLOWING our positive test for Mepivacaine (a local anaesthetic used for nerve blocks) in the gelding Willpower in 2013, we spent tens of thousands of pounds investigating the incident. Despite CCTV footage covering a period far greater than the accepted withdrawal period for the drug and other extensive tests and

investigations we were unable to establish how the horse had been exposed to that drug. We believed that we had strong protocols in place to prevent accidental administration or cross-contamination but I had to accept liability, a fine, and disqualification of the horse.

After that I was determined to do everything in my power to ensure that it could not happen again. We strengthened our protocols, including the introduction of mandatory declaration of all prescription medicines for staff working with horses and an annual bio-security inspection conducted by former BHA veterinary director Tim Morris. Nonetheless, I remained acutely aware of the risk of cross-contamination from humans using non-prescription or illegal drugs and of the incalculable financial and reputational damage that a positive test in a big race could do to our business.

THEREFORE, when in 2017 I attended — together with other Middleham trainers and representatives from NARS and the NTF — a meeting called by the local police and Racing Welfare to discuss a proposal to introduce drug-testing for racing staff in the area, I immediately pledged my support. That proposal soon became bogged down in comparisons with schemes in other industries where the testing is invariably done on Health and Safety grounds and combined with alcohol testing.

I became increasingly frustrated by the negative attitude and lack of appreciation of this risk of cross-contamination and eventually decided that we must go it alone. We introduced random drug-testing earlier this year. Another 'first' for Johnston Racing. How long before the rest of the industry wakes up and follows suit?