



Mark Johnston's

IT SEEMS that, for almost as long as I have been training horses (35 years), I and many others have been talking about a crisis facing British racing and blaming it on the funding model and consequent lack of prize-money. There have been many changes during that time. Perhaps, most significantly the change in administrator from the Jockey Club, through the BHB, to the BHA and some shift in control of the purse strings with racecourses bizarrely winning the picture rights and controlling how media income is distributed to the 'players'. But the crisis remains.

Now, more than ever before, that crisis is evident to everyone with an interest in the sport, whether professionally or as a spectator, on a daily basis. Field sizes are crumbling. There simply aren't enough horses in training in Britain to sustain the ever-growing fixture list. In particular, there is a desperate shortage of good horses. It may sound ridiculous coming from a racehorse trainer but there isn't just too much racing, there is even too much good racing.

One naïve contributor to the Racing Post letters page, who I'd guess has never owned a racehorse and probably never will, wrote about the three-runner Gordon Richards Stakes at Sandown and said: 'Please remind me to break into fits of laughter the next time I hear a complaining owner banging on about lousy prize-

RACING TO THE BOTTOM

money in Britain. I wish I owned a 70-rated plodder – I could have picked up some of the money that nobody else seems to want'.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? But, apart from the tens of thousands of pounds that it would cost him to train and race his '70-rated plodder', it would have cost him £800 to enter the Gordon Richards Stakes at Sandown, and how many races like that would he need to enter before he would find one where he would get a share of the prize-money that would cover his costs for the day, let alone for the time between running in races?

Unlike many of the more valuable races, the Gordon Richards Stakes at Sandown was a simple six-day entry with an entry

fee equating to 0.5% of the total prize fund – many of the most valuable races have early closing dates and several forfeit stages to extract a very significant proportion of the prize-money from owners. We can, however, with the new transparent entry and declaration system, track the entries at the six-day stage and see what we might be up against. Charlie tracked that Gordon Richards Stakes and was well aware that there were only six entries but he is not stupid enough to enter a '70-rated plodder'. We only had two horses in the yard with any chance of being competitive in that race. West End Charmer is coming back from a long lay-off and wasn't ready, and Living Legend had two other, more valuable options coming up. He couldn't run in all three, or even two. Charlie opted to wait for the Jockey Club Stakes at Newmarket or the Huxley Stakes at Chester. We all know now that that was the right decision with the ammunition we had available but, of course, we desperately wish that we had enough good horses to have allowed us to have a runner in the Gordon Richards Stakes as well.

THE suggestion that owners and trainers don't want the money on offer is similar to that made by ARC when trainers rejected their proposal to offer £5 million extra prize-money in

Tongue-tied?



see his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth (pictured left)? The commentator mentioned it at one point.

It isn't a particularly unusual trait but it strikes me that I usually see it in high-class, older horses. Double Trigger did it later in his career and I have a feeling that some of our other top older horses have had the same habit.

Of course, it could be that I

Straight Talking

return for nine-race cards (potentially up to 11-race cards if there were races divided, not that there was much chance of there being enough horses to bring that about) on the all-weather tracks during the winter. We all know, of course, that there are far more low-grade horses in Britain than high-grade horses. There always will be but, with the steady drain of highly rated horses to countries where the returns are greater, the base of the pyramid is widening. The most likely races to attract a large field, despite the fact that there are more and more of them, are the lowest grade handicaps and ARC's model is to run as many of these as possible. Every one of them attracts significantly more in media rights income than it costs to stage and they want to run as many as they can.

THEY don't want to run more high-quality races as they know there aren't enough horses to run in them but, even at the lowest level, where they are seeking to run more and more races, the field sizes are inadequate. The crucial field size for these races which, let's face it, are run principally to provide a product that can be sold to the betting industry, is eight. A race with fewer than eight is considered by the racecourses and bookmakers to have 'failed'. At Lingfield's last meeting, on April 28, five of the seven races 'failed' and two had only five runners. How on earth did they think they were going to fill nine-race cards?

simply don't pay the same attention to the less high-profile races or to horses before they have made a name for themselves but I have been thinking about it for a long time and I'm fairly sure that it is more common in good horses.

I HAVE long wondered if it is in some way related to expansion of the larynx for maximum air intake and if horses can 'learn' or adopt the technique. I'd be very interested to hear from anyone else who has noted that it is more common in a particular class, age or distance range. One thing is for sure, it isn't a negative and it isn't related to being tired: Living Legend was doing it from the minute he left the stalls.

Throwback from the outback

THOSE owners who have been with us since our early days in Middleham – there are still quite a few of them with horses in the yard – or even those, like Paul Venner, who remember the days at Bank End Stables in Lincolnshire might get quite a shock if they visited the yard at the moment. Among our team of riders they would see one Gary Ritchie, a real 'blast from the past'.

Gary has been working in racing in Australia for a quite a few years now but is back in blighty to address some issues with his Australian visa and work permit.



Gary with Mister Baileys in 1994

Gary was one of our very first members of staff in my first year as a trainer. He gave up his position as a trainee mechanic on a YTS (Youth Training Scheme) to try his hand in racing and took to it like a duck to water. When he joined us Gary had never sat on a horse and he cantered his first racehorse on the North Somercotes beach after just one week of intensive training.

GARY travelled the world with our horses in the early days, including a trip to Hong Kong with Marina Park in 1992. Many of you would recognise him – although he has aged a little bit – from the photograph of Paul Venner hugging him in the winner's enclosure at Newmarket after Mister Baileys won the 1994 2,000 Guineas. It is good to have him back, even if it is only temporary.

Gary aboard Hadrianus at Kingsley Park last month