



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

THERE WERE five meetings abandoned, or partially abandoned, in recent weeks due to jockeys saying that their horses had slipped and that the track was unsafe. It is an unprecedented number of abandonments for the time of year. Many, no doubt, will blame it on climate change.

No end of things are blamed on climate change these days, from the spread of infectious disease to the price of eggs – actually, I'm not sure if I've ever specifically heard the price of eggs being blamed on climate change but, when I was a kid, my dad used to always say: 'What's that got to do with the price of eggs?' He wasn't talking about climate change (I don't think it had been invented back then), but about all manner of other things. I never did find out what anything had to do with the price of eggs.

Anyway, I'm not buying the idea that a new 'epidemic' of horses slipping is caused by climate change. Nor am I buying into the, seemingly, preferred solution to the problem – to put more water on. That seems too much like the philosophy of homeopaths and other nutters who believe in treating like with like.

IT strikes me there is little doubt that there are more incidents of horses slipping being reported by jockeys. This might mean that there has been some alteration to the way tracks are prepared which is leading to this; or, of course, it might just mean that 'slipping' or loss of traction which would previously have gone unreported is now being reported and deemed to be an indication of an unsafe track.

So, first we need to decide whether there are more horses slipping or just more being reported. If it can be established that more are slipping, then we must look for the cause and consider what we can do to prevent it. It is a fairly new problem and so must result from a fairly recent change. If we accept that the change is in the track and not in

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE GOING

the attitude of the jockeys then we must, indeed, look to what has changed in track management in recent years. Climate change, regardless of what some would have us believe, is a slow process and I would defy even the most ardent disciple of the church of Greta Thunberg to objectively link it to the number of horses slipping.

No, the most dramatic change to racecourses in recent years is the amount of water being applied by man, not the amount applied by nature; and the difference in the way that man applies it – not in cycles of feast and famine but as a constant trickle of a few millimetres every day.

HE amount of watering has increased dramatically since the administrators of racing changed the instructions to racecourses and they were directed to water with the aim of providing Good-Firm ground rather than only to grow grass and never to alter the state of the going. And, of course, before that, watering increased as more and more courses installed irrigation systems.

But, even in the last couple of years we have seen a significant increase in watering with more and more clerks of courses blatantly ignoring the guidelines and publicly stating that they are



All Johnston Racing runners are fitted with new alloy racing plates the day before they run

watering to achieve, or maintain, Good ground rather than the BHA's Good-Firm. I have to sympathise with them as they are doing this because they have learned, through bitter experience, that they will get more non-runners on Good-Firm ground, despite that supposedly being the accepted description of the optimum flat racing surface, than they will on Good-Soft. Trainers have driven this behaviour.

JOHNSTON Racing horses were directly involved in four of the five meetings affected in that we had horses denied a run at Haydock, Chester, Lingfield and Hamilton and, as is our policy, we made no charge to the owners for transport or raceday expenses for the non-runners. It was a very

significant cost for us.

At Hamilton, where four races had been run and I had saddled three runners and two winners before an inspection was called, I was invited to join the group for the track inspection. The group comprised BHA officials including a steward and a veterinary officer; jockeys William Buick, Sam James and Callum Rodriguez; trainers or trainer's representatives Jim Goldie, Kevin Dagleish and myself; and Hamilton Park executives and ground staff. The jockeys all said they had slipped and/or seen others slip and Jim Goldie said the track was clearly 'slippy'. When asked whether the track was safe, and particularly when pressed to say whether it was '100% safe', they all said that it was unsafe. I said that I was not in a position to comment on what it was like for a jockey on a horse and that it was impossible to say it was 100% safe as racing itself is risky and no track can ever be deemed to be 100% safe but, from my own perspective, walking on it with a stick, I couldn't say it was any less safe than any other track or gallop I had walked.

THE two jockeys who had ridden for me, Joe Fanning and Jason Hart, had made no mention of any issues with the track, they were not part of the inspection group, and I had no opportunity to speak to either before going out for the inspection. It did occur to me that my horses might have better grip than others as, by our normal policy, they were all fitted with new alloy racing plates the day before and so I was relieved to hear that whenever a horse is reported to slip, the stewards request that the veterinary officer inspect the shoes. He reported on this occasion that the horses were adequately shod but, nonetheless, there is a

significant difference between new shoes and those with any wear.

It was clear to me that, almost from the point when a single jockey reports that a horse has slipped and blames the track, officials are in a no-win situation. Nobody can give guarantees that horses won't slip and so it is almost inevitable that races will be abandoned.

It is hard to see any immediate solution but I think there are some simple things the BHA could do:

1. Change the nomenclature for the optimum racing surface and call it 'Good'. It is clearly beyond many people to accept that Good-Firm can be better than just plain Good. So move the scale so that the optimum surface, which is currently called Good-Firm is now called Good.

2. Take responsibility for description of the going away from clerks of courses, who clearly have an unacceptable vested interest. Or, at the very least, do an official going correction on the day. The BHA argue that this would be too expensive and require too many people, but they seem to have an abundance of people on course these days. They could surely divert some from other areas where they are overloaded. They would not, of course, be able to work from home or from High Holborn.

3. Allow some level of grip on shoes. I believe that the theory behind not allowing grips on shoes is to reduce the risk to jockeys who, having fallen off, might be trampled by a horse with sharp protrusions on its shoes. But, firstly, the objective must be not to have jockeys falling off and surely it is not beyond the wit of man to produce a shoe with more grip without having to have knife edges or spikes on it. All we need is small protrusions so that there isn't a smooth metal surface. ■

£621 million!

HOW MANY times have you heard it said that 'the punter pays for racing'? For almost as long as I have been a trainer I have argued against this claim. I have pointed out that it is the owners who pay me and, in turn, all of those who work with me or act as suppliers to our business. Of course, punters, through betting levy and media rights payments, contribute to prize-money and this equates to a return to owners of a little under 20% of their costs.

In recent years, whenever I have entered into this debate, I have been shouted down and the idea that racing is totally dependent on income from betting has become so accepted that I had actually come to doubt my long-held beliefs.

It was a relief, therefore, at the recent Horseracing Industry Conference, to see the figures again, in a presentation by Peter Hawkings of Portas Consulting. In 2019, the betting industry, through levy and media rights payments, contributed £262m to racing. That's a whopping amount of money, but it was dwarfed by the £621m contributed by owners. Other income streams for British racing that year came from breeders (£337m), racegoer expenditure (£257m), sponsorship (£56m) and TV broadcasters (£8m).

So, betting was responsible for 17% of the money flowing into racing that year. That makes 'the punter' a very important customer indeed. The punter pays for 17% of racing. The punter is undoubtedly an important customer to me and anyone else who makes a living out of racing. But not as important as the owners. ■