



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

All owners are equal, but some are more equal than others

WE ARE forever being told, telling ourselves, and telling others, how much better the owners are being treated now than they were in the past. Racecourses, on the whole, are far more conscious of the need to look after owners than they were when I started training 35 years ago. Many courses supply free food and refreshments for owners, offer six badges where they used to offer four, and sometimes many more if the owner is a syndicate. Trophies are no longer given a nominal, and often vastly inflated, value which could be deducted from the prize-money and entry fees are, in percentage terms, half of what they used to be. And yet, it seems, that there has never been greater unrest among owners; never a greater shortage of people willing to lose their hard-earned cash through ownership of horses; and never a greater shortage of quality bloodstock to fill the seemingly ever-expanding number of races.

So, are owners really better off now? Maybe not. Is the racecourse experience for owners better now than it was in the past? I'm not so sure. I suspect there was a time when owners were treated like kings. That was, perhaps, largely because many of them were kings, or queens, or friends and relations of kings and queens.

IT was, after all, the 'Sport of Kings'. Racehorses were owned, and bred by the landed gentry and they raced against horses which

were owned and bred by their friends, friends of friends, and relations, however distant. What's more, the same group of people generally owned the racecourses that they raced on and many were members of the Jockey Club who administered all aspects of the sport.

They didn't care how many badges were available for an owner, whether a sandwich was offered, or how much space was allocated for owners to stand and watch their runner. They were dining – and, if the tales are true, consuming copious quantities of port – with the stewards, in the committee rooms, the Jockey Club Rooms, or in their private boxes. They were at home on the racecourse; they were welcomed whether they had a runner or not, and could bring whatever group of friends happened to

be staying with them at the time. They certainly never queued to get in.

It was inevitable that it would change. Society was changing and racing needed to follow suit. The betting industry was on the scene, racecourses were becoming more commercial and, in any case, the old owner-breeders no longer had enough money to compete with the new 'kings' from abroad. The new 'kings' brought riches to the sport which surpassed anything invested by the old owner-breeders and, thankfully for the racecourses and all of those trying to make a living from the sport, they expected relatively little in return. They were attracted by the heritage and reputation of British racing. They considered themselves guests in our country and so they were reluctant to question or criticise the established

structure of governance.

What's more, they paid for their own lunch, hired corporate boxes from which to view their runners, and never complained about the pitiful prize-money. The Jockey Club members and their friends could still enjoy the racecourses as if they were their own, despite the fact that they were no longer the principal benefactors.

HOWEVER, by the time I came on the scene, the Jockey Club's days were probably already numbered and I (when I eventually got over the fear that they would take my licence away) took every opportunity to stick the proverbial boot in. In

1993 the British Horseracing Board (BHB) was formed to take control of some commercial aspects of the sport while the Jockey Club retained responsibility for regulation.

LORD Hartington, one of the principal architects of the BHB, believed that the two bodies could work together, complementing each other, and that this might actually secure the future of the Jockey Club as regulator. Many shared his vision and hopes for the Jockey Club and, to this day, some, including me at times, hark back to the days when the regulator was manned almost exclusively by 'horsemen' who had grown up with horses; bred them, reared them, ridden them and competed on them. For them, horseracing was principally about horses or, at least, that was the aspect of the sport that they best understood.

But those Jockey Club stewards and members were, largely, from a bygone age and, in 1997, when a York racecourse steward denied Andrew Franklin the right to sit down in a meeting about cameras in the paddock and then told his colleague, John Fairley, to take his hands out of his pockets, the cat was out of the bag. The prejudices of racing's rulers had been exposed to the wider public and it was then inevitable that they must go. By 2006 the Horseracing Regulatory Authority had been formed, and a little over a year later we got the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) that we know today.

THE animals had, in effect, taken over the farmhouse and the running of the farm but, unlike in Orwell's classic, many of the old farm employees were integrated into the new regime and the new incumbents have, it seems, learned quickly from the old guard.

Oh, how the BHA executives would love to have the power, status and outward respect that was afforded to their old Jockey Club equivalents. I can only assume that it is this ego trip that has led to their recent desire to limit trainers' access to the weighing room. I imagine they believe that, in doing so, the weighing room becomes something of a BHA fiefdom and creates a level of privilege that is afforded to them and not to mere trainers. The implementation of these new instructions has varied between tracks from little change to having a 'bouncer' on the door who challenges any trainer who wishes to enter and enquires as to the nature of his or her business.

WHY would any trainer want to enter the weighing room other than to carry out the normal duties required on raceday? For that matter, I cannot recall the last time I entered a racecourse for any reason other than to work. I used to go to the weighing room as soon as I arrived on course to collect a racecard, check for any non-runners and particularly relevant reasons for withdrawal, going changes, jockey changes, etc. Now, most racecourses have stopped displaying this information in the weighing room, presumably as a further disincentive for us to enter, and I cannot for the life of me think where we are expected to get it, especially as most racecourses have inadequate wi-fi and mobile data provision and some even block form sites such as the Racing Post.

It all smacks of a total disrespect for those providing the racing product, whether they be trainers or owners, similar to that disrespect for those Channel 4 executives all those years ago.

Some trainers and many owners who are not kings, queens, or whatever the gender neutral equivalent of a king or

queen is, are tired of being treated as if it is some great privilege to be allowed entry to the racecourse to watch your own horse run, to get a worse view of it than is available on tv at home, and to even be denied the right to video your own horse as the racecourses have assumed all rights to images of your horse and sold them on to third parties.

A whole new attitude towards those providing the spectacle is required, whether they be owners, trainers, jockeys or stable staff. ■

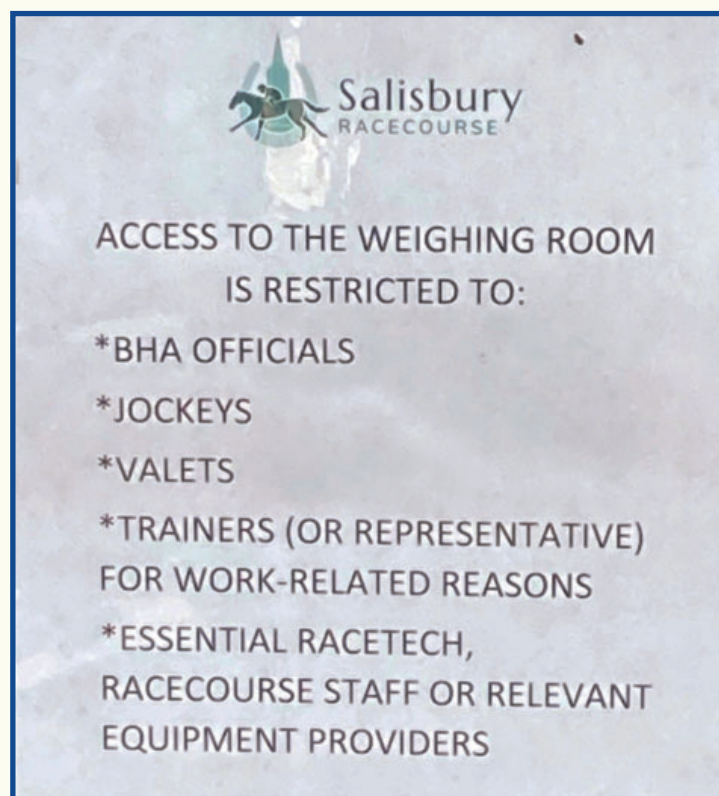
Jock, our own Mr Fixit

I'M SURE it is the same in sport and in business: You most appreciate the value of a team member when he or she isn't there.

That is something I have always noted about Jock (Brian) Bennett – like most people who know him, I've never called him Brian – we miss him when he isn't here.

Jock is Johnston Racing's 'Mr Fixit', and I don't mean in the sense that he carries a screwdriver in his pocket. Jock, usually very quietly, sets about solving any problems that arise during the working day, with people, horses, vehicles, gallops, machines or any of the other cogs in our wheel. He is one of the key components that helps keep things running smoothly.

I hope he'll continue to do so for quite some time. ■



Notice on the weighing room door at Salisbury racecourse