



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

MAKING SENSE OF THE SALES

S OMEBODY MUST be making money in the British and Irish racing and breeding industries. The cost of yearlings at the sales, so far, looks to be up around 25-30% and this is at a time when all we hear is that the industry, the country, and arguably the whole of Europe is in an economic crisis.

So how can people afford to pay so much for racehorses? Is it the old adage of the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer? Or are the figures artificially inflated? Is it simply a case of the money going round in a circle? The owners pay more for the yearlings, so the stallion owners can put the covering fees up, so the value of breeding stock goes up, and the owners get more for the best horses on retirement from racing. Simple. And it helps when the stallion owner, breeder, and racehorse owner are one and the same or, at least, intrinsically linked.

This circle has always existed to some extent and, to be blunt, values have been hyped. The value of a racehorse has never really borne any relationship to its potential earning ability. Certainly not in Britain or Ireland, not by a long shot. There has always been an element of hype around the value of racehorses but the circle had to be squared by owners putting in vast sums of money every year. Apart from maintaining the value of the stock, the huge cost of production, of palatial stud farms and thousands of workers, has to be covered.

SO, how can it be that, at a time when we have recently lost some of our biggest benefactors and many owners have stated an intention to cut back, that the price of bloodstock is going up? Is it really down to the weakness of the pound and euro, the

strength of the US dollar, and the levels of prize-money in other jurisdictions? Are a significant number of British and Irish yearlings going to race outside Europe? If so, we are in serious trouble.

Of course, if foreign owners are buying horses to race here and are simply paying more because of the strength of their currency and apparent value in relation to bloodstock in their own country, then that is fine. Foreign owners have sustained the level of competition in Britain for the last 40 years or more. But if some of the best stock is leaving as yearlings to go to Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, the US, or elsewhere, the quality of our racing will plummet and it will take more than a small percentage increase in prize-money to stop it. 2024 could be too late to try and arrest the talent drain.

NO COMPROMISE ON STANDARDS

CHARLIE AND I have undoubtedly been finding it hard to buy but I don't believe we have altered our method of valuation and we certainly have not compromised on our set standards for pedigree and conformation. Sadly, it just means that more of those we wanted have gone elsewhere.

I have always said that the horses I buy are not necessarily those that I want most. They are the horses I could afford and, more importantly, considered to be value for money. If an owner was to give me a million pounds to spend, and free rein to do so, I know I wouldn't spend it on one

horse or even two horses. Sure, I see horses sold for two or three hundred thousand that I consider to be reasonable value and, in the current climate with breeding stock changing hands for vast sums, I can even see logic in paying double that for some pedigrees, but only if you have enough money to buy several of them. I am all too aware of the chances of a single egg in a basket getting broken.

IT is very hard to go to the sales and watch yearlings that I have drooled over going to our competitors and even harder to face the prospect of racing against them in the future. But I get a huge kick out of having acquired horses such as Dubai Mile for 20,000 euros and Lakota Sioux for 15,000 euros (all Charlie's doing, that one. I wasn't even at the sale). It is great to win big races with horses like that, especially as they are not freaks, isolated incidents, or something that we stumbled on by chance. Every year we have new rags-to-riches stories and we can safely say that every one is well bred. We don't buy bad pedigrees.

THE BONUS KINGS

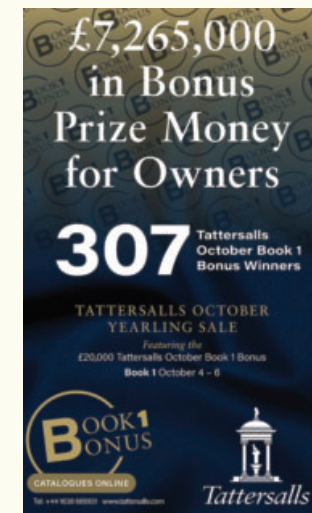
J AMES WILLOUGHBY's piece on the Tattersalls Book 1 bonus says a lot about the level that we are operating at and the level of competition we are up against. Even if you go by the principle, as I do, that, in bloodstock, a lot more money buys you a little advantage, it is still hard to compete against horses valued at 10 times the

amount. Nonetheless, as with the stars that cost very little, there is a great deal of satisfaction from managing to compete in the same arena as those with vastly greater resources.

I love the challenge of going to the best sales to try to buy. Even when I first started, from our little yard in Lincolnshire, I went to what was then the Houghton Yearling sale and is now October Book 1. I was never a

believer in going to the sales which were dominated by horses I could afford. I always believed in looking at the horses I wanted most and hoping that I could afford to buy one of them.

Our principles when buying at such a lofty sale are unchanged and it is surprising that there are a significant number of horses which do not meet our minimum pedigree criteria and so which we would not buy at any price. Our



purchases are still carefully targeted and it seems to pay dividends, and bonuses!

BEST BUY?

I WAS recently asked, in a questionnaire for the GBRI quarterly magazine: 'What would you say has been your biggest coup at the Tattersalls October Yearling Sales?' I couldn't say what was my biggest 'coup' as I don't tend to think of them like that. There have been many cheap horses that won and/or were sold for many times their purchase price but I immediately recalled the one purchase of which I have always been most proud.

Even back in 1994 I like to think I had done my homework well or, to tell the truth, my late sister Lyn had done it for me, at a time when there were no aids such as Equineline or Weatherbys Sales guides. I came across a colt out of the mare Pushkar. Of her five winners from five runners, only two had acquired small 'black type', despite earning Timeform ratings of 105 and 115, and so the catalogue page didn't do the mare justice.

All previous foals had been by very moderate sires and this colt was by Cadeaux Genereux, by far the best stallion she had visited. I bought him for 20,000 guineas and he was Bijou D'Inde, winner of the St James Palace Stakes. I still have the catalogue.