

THE JAMES WILLOUGHBY COLUMN



SUBJECTIVIST'S bid for the Group 2 Dubai Gold Cup at Meydan was never going to be an easy race to watch for his longstanding fans. When a horse has endured a career-threatening injury like his, it is not without additional risk that he enters the fray. The Dubai race was his second run back, and the first had left room for doubt.

In the event, Subjectivist ran a tremendous race to finish third to Broome and Siskany. He was closer to the record-setting pace than those two, and he showed that his long, imperious action was still very much intact. He settled better than when well beaten on his comeback in Saudi Arabia, and he even looked the winner briefly as he took over in the straight.

No horse can compete in a race without risk. And that risk is greater after a horse has had a serious setback. But we only have to recall the glittering career of Attraction for an example of how a horse can be managed through physical problems to great effect. Like his father, Subjectivist's trainer Charlie Johnston knows a heck of a lot about horses and is a similarly rational operator. And it should also be mentioned that the six-year-old's owner Dr Jim Walker is a thoughtful and sensitive operator.

Years of watching racing have led me to notice that good horses often pull hard when they return to the racecourse after injury, even though I don't have the data to back this up. Some people say that this is because they are too fresh, but it could also be that they are over-eager to test themselves



Attraction - A horse whose physical problems were managed to great effect

again. After all, horses like Subjectivist are highly competitive animals. The pedigrees of good horses are similar in a genetic sense, and many have similar dimensions or physical traits. The last one percent could be their desire to try harder. In a similar way, many champion human sports people are no more physically gifted than the rivals they beat, but instead are prepared to put more into competition.

The races within a race

WHEN we say a horse has done well despite the run of the race, we are implying that it could have done better had the pace been different. From the standpoint of physics, this is undoubtedly true when the correct inference is made about the strength of the gallop at various points. More often than not, it is easy to be fooled about how fast the runners actually ran just by watching.

Extreme cases are obvious, of course, but there is not much difference between a tempo which is too fast and one which is merely efficient, and it is particularly hard to make these judgements of undulating courses, for example.

The basic notions of pace are much better understood and accepted nowadays than 30 years ago. To run its best race, a horse needs to match the demands of power and energy to the demands of the course and distance. Most races go to the best horse on the day, but a significant minority are won by a lesser horse who was more favoured by the tempo.

It is widely accepted that the most efficient way to run a race is at even pace, taking into account the hills, bends and a standing start. This is not true for every horse because some have temperamental or physical needs to go a little faster or slower than the theoretically even, in order to be comfortable.

For most horses, however, spending energy evenly leads to their reserves being drained at a steady rate. Total energy used and therefore power – which is just the rate at which energy is transformed – bear an exponential relationship with speed. If you want to see this in action and your

car has a fuel consumption readout, record the difference between going 50mph and 60mph on the motorway, then compare this with the difference between 60mph and 70mph.

Each marginal increase in speed above 56mph results in a larger marginal use of fuel. (Here 'marginal' is used in statistical language, meaning 'at the margin' not 'relatively small' as it can mean in other contexts.)

When a horse pulls hard, it uses more energy per stride than when it is settled. This is obvious, but it is often overstated. Horses can often pull hard and still show their best form, but this happens more often when the early pace is steady and the demands of a race are not supramaximal. In a strongly run race, a horse who exceeds its capabilities for any length of time tends to pay a price in terms of efficiency. And this is probably what happened to Subjectivist in the closing stages at Meydan. He can certainly finish at least as well as Broome and Siskany on his old form.

Why can't television coverage be as good as in Dubai all year?

THE international feed from Meydan majored on broadcasters Nick Luck, Ruby Walsh, Rishi Persad and Angus McNae. What I love about their approach is their efforts to quantify the performances seen out on the track, and further to explain them technically. There seems to exist a belief elsewhere that this is not necessary, that horse racing on television can satisfy the viewer purely on the emotional, sentimental or experiential level.

There are a multitude of flaws with too much of an emphasis on this approach. One of the most common comes when the presenters involved are connected with the competitors on a social or even familial basis, where the emotion they feel is abstracted from viewers who are remote from the action in more than one sense of the word.



Subjectivist and Joe Fanning

Viewers cannot feel emotion simply because presenters say they are excited or enthralled or whatever; on the contrary, emotional content flows from the screen to the living room most often because it is self-evident. A good example of this was the aftermath of Honeysuckle winning at Cheltenham last month. Here, the significance of the events and the images which they provoked clearly did not need to be gilded by words.

Similarly, there is no point a presenter saying that a race is 'fascinating'. Patently, fascination is a highly subjective reaction. If you prefer a steak served rare, it is not 'delicious' to you if well-done, even if cooked perfectly to that level. And it certainly is not delicious if you are a vegan. Even the Cheltenham Gold Cup is not fascinating to many. I would rather watch The Great Egg Race, but that's just me.

As a viewer, we need paid experts on the television who are capable of differentiating between a poor renewal of a certain race and a good one, or else any description which follows is just synthetic. And we need it to be explained as well as it was when Equinox won the Group 1 Sheema Classic.

It isn't good enough to say that a horse is the best in the world, or even the best on the day, without explaining what makes it the case objectively. This does not always require numbers to be explicit, but the interpreter of the events must be able to think in a quantitative framework, or else their impressions are just personal to themselves. ■