

# KLARION KICKBACK SPECIAL

Mark Johnston's criticism in last month's Klarion about racecourses focussing on non-racing activities, such as concerts, which alienate regular racegoers drew a bumper postbag. Here we print a selection of your views and the responses from some of the courses under fire.

## Drunken imbeciles and full-on sex at Newmarket!

I am in complete agreement with Mark's comments in his Straight Talking column in the May Klarion regarding the after-racing music gigs.

Newmarket is 25 miles from me and is my regular racecourse. Through my previous horse ownership I still have a number of friends there and have a fond affection for the town and the gallops and often watch the work.

I was an early regular to the Friday night concerts, years back, thinking it would be a pleasant end to an evening of racing. How wrong I was. Those attending bore little resemblance to racing enthusiasts and I soon became bored with having to make my way through a jostling mass of drunken imbeciles, either puking or fighting, to get to the paddock from the restaurant.

The quality of the evening racing was also often poor . . . not that the majority would have known or cared. One evening, late on, a couple decided to have full-on sex in front of all of us, up against the furlong pole, as the star act reached a crescendo!

I never went again, and nor did many of my acquaintances.

The trio of business aims Mark refers to (retention, growth, new business) are so important, especially retention. In my early business days I tried too hard to expand quickly. It was to the detriment of my existing customers, and I soon learned a painful lesson. Look after and nurture your existing clients and grow your base from there. Customers are hard

won, but easily lost.

Things HAVE improved for the regular racegoers; we have moved on to better things from the days of little seating on the greenswards, poor catering and over-priced racecards. But there is still a lot to do. I remember, as an owner, being taken to the Owners' Bar at Yarmouth by former trainer Mark Tompkins for a drink and being invited into an 8ft x 6ft garden shed at the side of the stand! Unfortunately, the BHA seems bereft of a clear plan that would unify the racecourse owners, the Horsemen, the ROA and the media for the future.

**David Winter**  
West Tofts, Norfolk

*Editor's note: A spokesman for Newmarket said they did not wish to respond to Mr Winter's comments.*

## Some tracks neglect the regular racing fan

As a regular racegoer in Scotland and the north of England, I am in total agreement with the comments of Mark Johnston in his Straight Talking column in the May edition of the Kingsley Klarion.

He states how important the retention of existing racing fans is to the survival of racecourses, and racing. My experience is that some courses do not place any importance on the regular racing fan. Instead they focus on media rights (more races), hospitality, and post-racing events (usually music for the youngsters).

Mark uses Hamilton as a good example of a course focussed on retaining and growing the core racing customer base. A few years ago I had a real problem with the poor racing and the poor race day experience at Hamilton.

Since the appointment of Managing Director Ashley Moon there appears to have been an effort to improve things through the Sky Bet Series fixtures, a record £1.64million in prize-money, the Lanark Silver Bell now having £100k in prize-money, and improved course facilities.

However, Hamilton still falls into the trap of alienating horse racing fans with events that attract an audience of people with no interest in racing.

This season's fixtures include the following non-racing events:

- 19th May - Legendary dance DJ Dave Pearce
- 29th June - Go Radio DJ Battle
- 15th July - Live music from Callum Beattie
- 21st July - Simple Minds / Deacon
- Blue tribute bands
- 5th August - Peter Andre
- 25th August - George Bowie GBX anthems
- 24th September - Pat Sharp DJ.

It would be nice if instead of second-rate 'entertainers' they were promoting the Glasgow Stakes, the Lanark Silver Bell, and other racing-related selling points. Could the money spent on appearance fees be better spent elsewhere?

I am giving away my demographic

when I say that I tend to avoid the fixtures full of youngsters drinking as much as they can during racing as a prelude to their rave event. It can be a horrible atmosphere with the crowd of drunks and, like everywhere in society, drugs are also an issue.

Mark quotes a marketing mantra of 'retention, growth, new business'. Perhaps he can use his influence to encourage Hamilton to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Please continue making the Kingsley Klarion as interesting and thought-provoking as always.

**Alan Vannan**  
Peebles, Scottish Borders



**Ashley Moon of Hamilton responds:**

I certainly take on board Mr Vannan's comments and, of course, Mark's, and I do feel that we have made real progress in re-focusing our efforts on our racing product. That being said, I do think there is a difference in providing some cost-effective entertainment as part of the raceday experience at our evening meetings, compared to say the Jockey Club and ARC's full-blown concerts after racing that come at a major cost.

Much of the ancillary entertainment we put on for our racedays, with perhaps the exception of Ladies Night, is delivered on a relatively small budget and is designed to help broaden the appeal of a visit to Hamilton Park without overshadowing the racing, particularly with the number of weekend/evening fixtures we have where potential customers are looking for 'more' from their raceday experience. Likewise, with the exception of Ladies Night, all entertainment is post-racing, so those wishing to enjoy the racing can do so.

The reality for us is that something like GBX on Silver Bell Night does attract additional media interest and a significant number of additional racegoers, the vast majority of whom

enjoy the racing before the music. That combination was introduced in 2014 and in that time attendance at the fixture has grown by 50%, with admission revenue doubling over that period, all of which positively impacts the amount we can re-invest into the race programme. Indeed, Silver Bell and Ladies Night are our best attended and most profitable racedays by some margin, with a large amount of returning customers year on year, as well as new sponsors who are keen to get involved, all of which I'd like to think echoes the ethos of retention, growth, and new business.

Over the years we've tried countless different models of racedays, with and without entertainment, but invariably we've found that we need to strike an effective balance across the season to support admission levels, ticket pricing and the numerous other elements that all contribute to enable our increased investment in prize-money.

Rest assured that we will be continuing to focus on promoting our core racing product and the racing narrative as we get underway with the new season.

\*\*\*\*\*

**OTHER READERS** made similar comments to those above. One said racecourses had increasingly diluted their core product with theme days, such as Student Days where 'hundreds of young people converge on racecourses with, apparently, the sole purpose of getting inebriated as quickly as possible'. Another, describing himself as 'an older reader', said racecourses were not interested in whether older racegoers were alienated or not. 'All they are truly interested in is racecourse revenues and view my age demographic as a 'dying breed' not worth the bother'. A regular racegoer said he had given up his annual badges at Haydock Park and Ripon because 'I feel, more than ever, that I'm being pushed out of the sport while racecourses prioritise the 'next generation'. What is there for me?'



**Jonathan Mullin,**  
Operations, Marketing  
and Clerk of the  
Course at Ripon,  
replies:

We have music at all of our racedays, sometimes a brass band on the bandstand, sometimes a local artist, depending on the nature of the fixture. The aim is always to contribute to the relaxed atmosphere that we are trying to create rather than whip up a frenzy. We don't have big concerts or well-known artists and we are always keen to point out that the music runs alongside racing, which always has been and remains our focus. The feedback is almost always positive and indeed our bookings indicate strong retention figures with the same people returning regularly. We have not thus far had any student days and we have no plans currently to do so. I would accept that our summer Saturday meetings can sometimes attract a less 'Racing' crowd. That's more due to the time of year and groups looking for a day out rather than by design. Again though, we see a lot of the same groups coming back on those days. We have four Family Days most seasons with free entertainment for children within the Course Enclosure, so never interfering in any way with the racing product. These prove very popular and we see customers return for them year on year. I would argue that such days are key for the future of the sport. This is not prioritising the next generation but it would be short-sighted to not see the need for racing to continue to appeal to future generations.

We very much appreciate all types of feedback that come our way and when we are informed of scope for improvement we do our best to make it providing it is viable to do so. Anybody can call us at any time and speak to a member of the management team.

*Editor's note: Haydock were approached for comment but had not responded by our deadline.*



Continued from p.17

Don't blame the racecourses

I enjoy the usual dose of common sense in Mark's 'Straight Talking' columns. But I was frustrated that he fell into the trap in his May column of talking in vague generalisations (as is all too common in Racing) about how 'we must seek to promote those aspects of our sport and sell them to a younger generation'. Specifically what aspects or advantages is he referring to? And sell them, how? I am with Mark on his 'purist' approach to the racing experience, and I also regret the incursion of after-race entertainments and sales of over-priced drinks and food. But I find it difficult to blame racecourses for doing this. They need to be financially viable so we can see the sport we love on display. If it means putting on

bands and drinks to attract a younger crowd, so be it. It does not mean 'serious' racegoers are excluded from enjoying their racing.

Murari Kaushik  
Hampshire

*Editor's note:* Mark responds in his Straight Talking column on page 4.

Those Summer Nights . . .

A few years back in the Racing Post, Sean Magee wrote the following:  
*If Newmarket remains the flagship of racecourse pop concerts, their origins can be found in 1970 in the less sylvan surroundings of Wolverhampton, and the pioneer was Laurie Brannan, doyen of racing PR.*

*'Wolverhampton had an Easter Monday fixture,' Brannan recalls, 'and to add to the holiday atmosphere I booked a local band named Sight 'n' Sound to play on a stage we'd erected in the cheap enclosure. They performed during a 50-minute break between the fourth and fifth races and went down a storm.'*  
*Sight 'n' Sound never seemed to have troubled the chart compilers, but no matter. Their place in racing history - if not in music history - is secure.*  
*For when Nick Lees at Newmarket was looking to beef up attendance at summer meetings, Brannan was on hand to make the connection with Wolverhampton - with the result that in 1986 Suzi Quatro, the leather-clad queen of rock herself, became the first act to play the July Course.*

Laurie Brannan  
Crowthorne, Berkshire

Making the National easier won't placate protesters -- they want it gone

In the May edition of the Klarion, Mark Johnston and James Willoughby commented on the protesters who caused disruption at the Grand National, with James suggesting a big reduction in field size would cause a big reduction in fatalities.  
To coincide with the 1989 Grand National, I analysed the race for The Sporting Life, assessing and comparing casualties per fence and per circuit for the post-war periods before and after the major fence alterations of 1961 (the upright 'walls' softened with sloping on the take-off side), that is 1946-60 and 1961-88.  
For the sake of brevity I'll not reproduce all my findings. Suffice to state: most casualties were still fallers, but saw a reduction of 16%; 13% more horses were now completing the first circuit; but the impact of Bechers fell by only 2% from 20%. Nowadays - and I'll leave the data gathering to others - Becher's is as toothless as Albert Steptoe.  
The factors leading to non-completion beyond the character (one can no longer use 'stiffness') of the fences have received plentiful airing since 1989: the speed, breeding and constitution of modern chasers; and the sheer ability of participants. Much was said of the National being on its last legs in the 1970s until Red Rum resurrected it. I'd dispute that: the racecourse may have been on its last legs but the race was certainly not. Just consider some of the names during that era: Crisp; L'Escargot; Spanish Steps; The Dikler; Davy Lad; Alverton. These were top-notchers. The modern National has been reduced to a marathon slog for lesser lights. And let's not forget that even Red Rum's hallowed reputation rests on conquering National fences softer than they were in 1946-60 - albeit still tougher than today.  
Reducing the number of runners, a widespread suggestion, is no guarantee of a casualty-free race. Havoc can occur at any time in any horse race. Let's take the instance of the National's record field of 66 starters in 1929. 'General outcry,' stated The Times, preceded the race. Tipperary Tim, alone of 42, had survived without mishap the previous year, prompting a Bill to ban this 'annual orgy of cruelty' being introduced into Parliament.

# The Klarion welcomes your letters

Send to: klarion@johnston.racing or  
Kingsley Klarion, Kingsley Park, Park Lane,  
Middleham, DL8 4QZ.

Please include your name, postal address and a telephone contact number.  
*Letters may be edited.*

Aintree tried to help by increasing the cost of entry but a first prize of £13,000 (about £416,000 today) was too tempting. There were calls for race conditions to be more unattractive: entrants should have placed in a three-mile chase worth at least £300 (implemented three years later at £200); prize-money for placed horses should be reduced as even the fourth got £150 (about £4,800), equal to winning a minor race elsewhere; weights should be compressed between 11st 7lb and 12st instead of 10st and 12st 7lb (which remained top weight until 1961).

Yet, despite its size, the 1929 field was dispatched in one single line ('There was room for another dozen,' according to The Times); the first two fences claimed no-one; but the third demonstrated the National 'lottery' - 10 horses were stopped by a faller running loose along the fence. Not one of the 66 perished; two years later two among 23 fewer starters were killed. That's the 'lottery' that makes the National one of a kind. That's why we allow ourselves to pick three against the field.

There's the numbers and there's the danger The thrill of my nine-year-old self placing his first each-way bet on the National in 1956 and willing Royal Tan to jump every fence safely remains with me to this day - and the old fella rewarded crossed fingers by finishing third. I'm sure no racing fan or F1 addict watches in hope of a horse or driver fatality but the ever-present whiff of danger is part of the experience.

The brutal truth of the matter is that even a five-furlong National over matchboxes in Hyde Park won't appease the protesters. They want it gone. Then they'll target Cheltenham. They won't stop until all horse-racing is extinct. Presenting counter arguments and feel-good stories of racehorse welfare et al cuts no ice: you can't argue rationally with fanatics.

'People who wish for an alteration will find no support for their cause from those of us who watched,' said the

Racing Correspondent of The Times after the 1929 race.  
'If they wish for something...with greater safety they may find it elsewhere. Others can say what they like but I hope the conditions will never be altered. The Grand National is still the Grand National.'  
I wouldn't expect everyone to agree with me that the National has endured more than enough emasculation. But to avoid its death by a thousand cuts I sincerely hope the racing community raises its voice as one and echoes that war cry from The Times.

Michael Tanner  
Sleaford, Lincolnshire

\*\*\*\*\*

On the issue of the so-called "Animal Rights" (sic) rent-a-crowd anarchists and the Grand National, James Willoughby says in the May Klarion that he was 'impressed by the way the sport responded . . . with lots of sensible and well thought-out content'.  
I'm not convinced. We need to find a more persuasive argument than: 'If only they could see how well the horses are treated and loved by everyone in the sport, for whom horse welfare is paramount'.  
That is akin to a farmer saying: 'Look how our livestock are allowed to roam freely', before sending them off to the slaughterhouse. The point is not the process, but the end result. That is where the industry's perception problem lies.

Murari Kaushik  
Hampshire

*Editor's note:* I cannot agree with your analogy. The farmer's livestock sent to the slaughterhouse are raised for that purpose. Nobody trains a racehorse with the aim of it being killed in a race.



JOHNSTONRACING

# The Kingsley Park Partnerships

## Join our record-breaking team

Contact our team by phone on 01969 622 237  
or by E-mail at partners@johnston.racing

# www.johnston.racing