



# Mark Johnston's

## READERS KNOW THE SCORE

**T**HIS MONTH's Kingsley Kickback (p.16) is, perhaps, our best ever and surely shows, without doubt, that our readers feel very strongly about after-racing concerts (as pictured) and alternative entertainment on racecourses. Most of the letters we received broadly agreed with my views, but Murari Kaushik felt that I had talked 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".'

I had to look back at what I had written to see if he was right and I would argue that I said very little, vague or otherwise, about how we should market the sport to a younger generation. My piece was mainly about the fact that concerts are patently failing to attract a younger generation to our sport and are alienating existing customers. I talked of 'retention, growth, and new business' and said that racing would do well to heed this principle.

Only in my last paragraph did I say that we must look at the things that attracted our existing loyal fans and aim to sell those aspects of our sport to a younger generation. I did not suggest, vaguely or otherwise, how we should do it, but I could certainly come up with some ideas.

I'm not short on ideas, as I have shown in marketing and growing our own business over the years. Some of my ideas, I will admit, have been spectacularly wrong and have necessitated quick u-turns but enough have been right, many have been copied, and a few have set new standards for the industry. I know you have to try new things but, in doing so, you have to be quick to recognise when you are wrong.

It is vitally important to be continually evolving and moving



forward and I accept that that might be what racecourses were trying to do when they introduced after-racing concerts but, if there was any truth in their claim that their objective was to introduce a new audience to racing, they should have quickly realised that it wasn't working and moved on to the next idea. I was prompted to write on the issue last month by ARC greatly reducing the number of concerts at their meeting but, as I said, they made the decision for all the wrong reasons.

**W**HILE innovation is to be welcomed, promoting alternatives to your core product is surely stupidity. It seems that many, if not most, racecourse managers still can't decide what their core product is and some might even argue that their core product is food and beverage with racing simply serving as a way of getting people into their bars. But, surely, the impact of media rights income on racecourse finances should have been enough to show them what side their bread is buttered on.

Showing other sports and adverts for non-racing products and entertainment on screens that could, and should, be showing racing is, in my opinion, crazy. But it is common on British racecourses. For me, watching what racecourse managers put out on their television screens and other

**T**HE FLAT season is now in full swing and, on Derby Day, when this Kingsley Klarion is winding its way towards you, I will be attending my 10th consecutive day at the races. I have recently been racing from Hamilton in the north to Goodwood in the south, Haydock to the west and Berlin to the east. And, apart from when I was in Germany at Hoppegarten and Cologne, I have been asked, at least once every day, if I am enjoying my retirement.

I shouldn't let it annoy me but it does. It is a reminder

## Taking the biscuit?

that people think I go racing to socialise and maybe get a free lunch. Nothing could be further from the truth and I'd swap any racecourse dining facility for a quiet place to sit, when I don't have a runner at that track, and screens to watch racing.

# Straight Talking

marketing sites on course tells me that they don't actually think that racing is the main motivation for their customers' attendance. If they are right, I would suggest that this situation is the result of decades of promoting their venues principally as places to drink, eat a bit and bet, rather than promoting the racing.

The betting industry has never had any such doubts about its objectives and they have ensured that they get their pound of flesh in terms of the type of races which will offer them the best margin and the advertising and media coverage which will drive betting turnover. They cannot be blamed for doing what is undoubtedly best for their own businesses but their best interests should not be confused with the best interests of racing.

My ideas for selling racing to new customers would principally revolve around promoting the sport, its intricacies, and its participants – mainly the horses. I would concentrate coverage on racing, rather than betting, and encourage viewers and racegoers to have their own opinions on the likely outcome of races rather than relying on tipsters or following betting trends. The options for improving coverage of the sport, in quantity and quality, are endless.

At least one letter which we received referred to 'student days' and claimed that they dilute the core product. I cannot agree with that. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with having large numbers of students or any other young people in the racecourse provided you concentrate on selling them racing rather than music and drink. I recently attended an evening meeting at Newcastle where they had managed to attract 8,000 students. I thought the music beating out from one of the bars and clearly upsetting the horses in the paddock was totally unnecessary and counterproductive, but I saw many good sides to having all those young people there. The stands were packed and many were watching racing. That can't be a bad thing but so much more could be done to sell racing to those young people.

The old Doncaster weighing room, before the current stand was built, had the best facility for trainers but there are no trainers' rooms, as such on British racecourses now. The nearest thing to it is at York where there is a 'trainers room' tacked on to the end of the saddling boxes but it is only a 4ft by 6ft shed with two chairs, two small screens and a kettle. That said, it serves the purpose well as most trainers seem to be unaware of its existence. The only problem is Richard Fahey. He eats all the biscuits. If he goes on like that, he'll be fatter than me.

## Catterick's gourmet secret

**N**ICK SMITH, Director of Racing and Communications at Ascot Racecourse (pictured), is not really one of the public faces of Ascot, never mind of racing, but there is no doubt that he is one of the movers and shakers in our sport. What's more, unlike many of those in key administrative positions in racing, he makes a point of getting to the 'coal face'. He doesn't sit in his office, never mind work from home.



He, along with some of his team, including Clerk of the Course Chris Stickels, seem to have been on a world tour of racecourses and training establishments recently and I have spotted him at Newmarket, York, Cologne and Catterick.

When I saw him at Newmarket I asked: 'What are you doing here? Spying on the opposition?' Quick as a flash, he said, 'We have no opposition.' Good answer!

He and his team came to Middleham, took Karl Burke and me out for dinner, and visited the yard the next morning. Over a typically sumptuous dinner in the Wensleydale Heifer, he proved to be a man after my own heart in many ways. He likes a glass of wine and good red meat. Like me, he eats his beef medium rare and without any sauces or 'mush' and he was full of praise for the steak in the Wensleydale Heifer. 'That was excellent', he said, 'and I'm having steak again tomorrow. We're eating in the steak restaurant at Catterick'.

Karl and I couldn't believe this. A steak restaurant at Catterick? We had never heard of such a thing but Nick assured us it was right, pulled up his invitation on his phone, and announced that, 'we are invited for lunch in The Winning Steak restaurant'. It seemed he was right, but we had a good laugh about the fact that owners and trainers don't get to dine there.

I was at Catterick myself the next day and, while waiting for the jockey in the paddock, I happened to glance up and noticed the new sign over the building that used to be a self-service cafeteria – The Winning Streak. I laughed and laughed and have told the story to dozens of people since. Nick also split his sides laughing over it the next time I saw him, but he assured me that the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding was excellent. He was nearly right.