



1994 - 2022

Record-breaking 29 consecutive  
centuries of domestic winners

Our Winners Tell the Tale

Johnston Racing Ltd Kingsley Park Middleham

North Yorkshire DL8 4QZ 01969 622 237

info@johnston.racing

www.johnston.racing

# Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

**I**T'S GOOD to be a contender in a competitive title race. That's the stand-out quote in Catherine Macrae's story in the Racing Post of June 27 reporting that Joe Fanning, 52, had taken the lead in the Flat jockeys' championship.

At that date, Joe was leading the former champion jockey Oisín Murphy by one winner, with Hollie Doyle and William Buick tied in third place.

It's typical of the self-effacing Irishman that, when asked about his championship chances, he plays down the extent of his achievements to date.

'I'm really pleased with how the season has started,' he states, adding 'it feels fantastic to still be riding regular winners.'

Obviously, there's a long way to go before the championship is decided, even with the ludicrously artificial, official end date of October 21, but, given the way Joe is riding at present, there's every reason to presume he can remain competitive right to the end. Macrae points out that Joe's June was his best month since July 2017, with 23 victories to that point at a strike rate of 22 per cent. The rule, initially introduced because of the Covid pandemic, that jockeys should be restricted to riding at one meeting per day should also help Joe's title attempt, as some of his younger and well-connected rivals might have been tempted to double up on meetings in an attempt to bolster their championship bids.

A fantastic judge of pace, and a master of controlling a race from the front, Joe is using his skills and considerable experience to terrific effect at the moment. It's very satisfying to see that he is, at last, some might say, being accorded the type of acclaim which his riding so richly deserves.

Watching ITV's coverage of Royal Ascot 2023, featuring Ruby Walsh's superb analysis of many of the races, I was struck by just how difficult a jockey's lot can be.

There's the small matter of nursing horses through the preliminaries and getting them to the start ready to give of their best against a backdrop of huge crowds and the attendant hullabaloo; keeping horses cool and collected when one or more of the runners play up at the stalls, especially in big fields where the loading process can be protracted and when Luke Harvey and his cameraman are trying to catch your eye; and making the best of a poor draw (having assessed whether the draw is, in fact, good

or poor). Then there's knowing which horses are likely to be ridden up with the pace; negotiating their way through the early part of a race; recovering from the frequent bumps or stumbles exiting the stalls; and asking your horse to settle or coping with a horse taking a keen hold.

The jockey must decide whether to make the pace, go with the pace, or hold up his horse in rear, especially in big fields on the straight course at Ascot where he must calculate in which group to seek to race, and react to other runners boxing him in or closing a gap for which he was aiming. Add to these tasks the judgement of where to challenge, when to challenge and how to get the best out of your mount in a finish, while all the time having to remain conscious of the number of times you have used your whip, and the manner in which you have done so.

For every good decision by a jockey praised by Walsh and his fellow judges, there are an equal, or greater, number of poor decisions forced on jockeys by the way races pan out. That's the reality, and the glorious uncertainty, of racing.

And after all that, there is the obligation to report to the trainer and often disappointed connections about how the horse has performed in the race, preferably finding some kind of positive note in giving your feedback.

**T**HAT more often than not at the Royal meeting the winners were ridden by top jockeys in Moore (6 wins), Dettori (4) and Hollie Doyle (3) suggests two things – that the top jockeys process all the difficulties of riding racehorses instinctively well, and that, having proven their ability to do so, they are then more likely to be given the rides on the 'best' horses in a race. They each deserve enormous credit for their Ascot successes, achieved in the 'white heat' of one of the world's most competitive race meetings.

The fact that Joe Fanning leads the way among his peers at this stage of the season is testament not only to the way Charlie Johnston's string has been performing but also to Joe's enormous desire and effort to recover fully from the effects of the injuries sustained in his fall last summer and to prove that his undoubted and exceptional riding talent remains undiminished.

Long may his present run of form continue.

\*\*\*\*\*

**I** ENJOYED most aspects of the ITV coverage of Royal Ascot, but, ignoring Mr Chapman's contributions, I have one small gripe.

Although the Royal meeting is packed with Group 1 and 2 races, a good number of the races are handicaps.

Personally, I'd like more attention to be drawn to the fact that the winner of these events need not have been, and often isn't, the best performer in the race. And if I hear the phrase 'a potential Group horse in a handicap' once more, I think I'll scream.

\*\*\*\*\*

**G**ED SHIELDS's letter (Kickback, p.9) regarding the flawed thinking behind the decluttering of the Saturday fixture list and the 'sacred window' of 2pm to 4pm makes perfect sense to me. Unlike the BHA, he gives us some facts and figures to back up his argument.

I especially like this point. 'It's difficult to understand why the existence of minor race fixtures on a Saturday will distract anybody from the day's biggest races which benefit from being on mainstream TV, just like they have (been) for years.' Anyone want to argue with that?