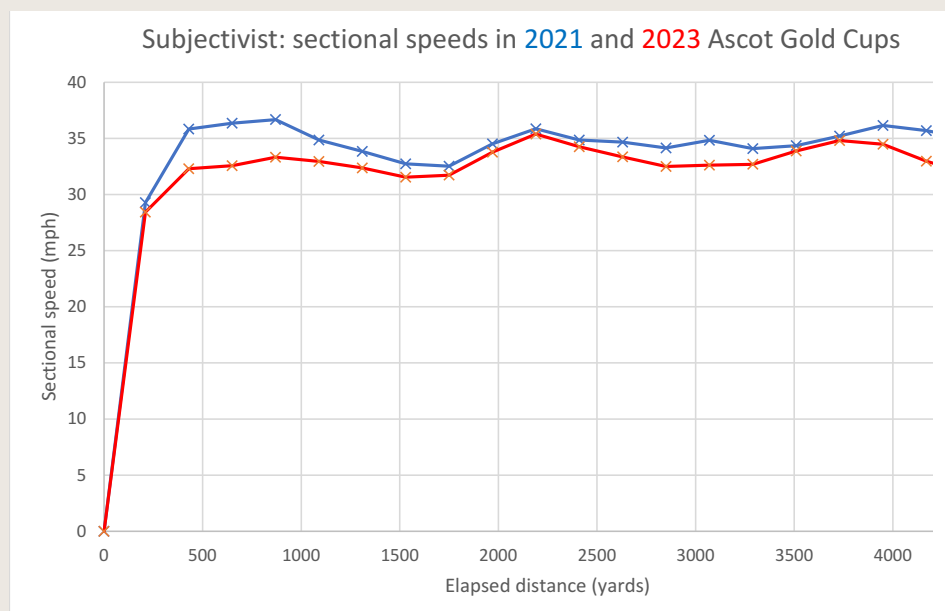# THE JAMES WILLOUGHBY COLUMN

Subjectivist shows his class in defeat

JOE FANNING has been riding at the top of his game this season, approaching 50 winners at a strike rate north of 20 per cent at the time of writing. His biggest task so far came on the back of Subjectivist in the Gold Cup at Ascot: could he reproduce the brilliant ride he produced in 2021?

Two years ago, Joe and a peak-form Subjectivist took the Gold Cup by storm. Prominent all the way, they began to draw ahead as the field climbed out of Swinley Bottom towards the home turn and stormed clear to win by five lengths.

Subjectivist clocked 4min 20.28sec for the two and a half miles on officially Good To Firm going back then. This year's winner, Courage Mon Ami, clocked 4min 20.97sec on similar going while, 4½ lengths behind in third, Subjectivist recorded 4min 21.79. Sectional timing provided by Longines enables us to compare how Subjectivist ran on both occasions. The information is displayed in the format of sectional speeds in the graph.

Subjectivist: sectional speeds in 2021 and 2023 Ascot Gold Cups

Longines sectional timing data shows Fanning controlled the pace similarly in both 2021 and 2023 Gold Cups

Joe controlled the pace on Subjectivist in a similar style to his excellent winning ride in 2021. Understandably, the horse was not in the same form because he is still recovering peak fitness after a tendon injury.

The features of the graph are as follows: the two lines – blue for 2021 and red for 2023 – have a very similar shape. The sections where the line goes upwards indicate Subjectivist covering the ground at a faster speed mainly because of topological features of the track; here, Joe was more efficient in 2023 because the climb to his cruising speed (in the first 500 yards) was gentler. There is also less variation in speed in the red plot representing this year's race which suggests Subjectivist's energy was rationed better.

Despite this, Subjectivist tired more towards the end, indicated by the steeper decline of the red line. Charlie Johnston did a great job in training the horse for this race while having to be mindful of the potential for a recurrence of his problem. So, to finish third was a great achievement.

If Subjectivist can stay sound, he can build on this performance and give a mighty display in the Goodwood Cup early next month. Charlie and his father Mark have a great record working round the physical setbacks of their horses, no doubt drawing on their scientific knowledge, but also helped by the yard's facilities for rehabilitation and the on-site veterinary team. While it is hard for a layman to understand the level of difficulty in handling a problem of this kind, the mere fact it has necessitated so much time off the track surely speaks for itself.

It is one of Johnston Racing's key principles that horses improve for racing. This is true when seasoning the young horse and true when conditioning the experienced one. A trainer cannot – and should not – allow a horse to reach the stress of a race on the home gallops. As every athlete knows, however, it is this time when the adrenalin flows that a hard edge is put on fitness.

A vacancy in the 'One To Follow'

IT IS very sad that a vacancy exists in my One To Follow spot. It is so sad that Good Morals is no longer around; she was a promising horse with a great attitude.

I have no hesitation in filling the position with Lion Of War. The late stallion Roaring Lion was clearly very good, as we have seen horses such as Dubai Mile, the Queen's Vase runner-up Saint George and easy Listed winner Running Lion all represent his potency at Black Type level. Hopefully, Lion Of War can join them.

This three-year-old – amazingly bought for only 7,000gns at Tattersalls – looked a potential top-notcher when winning his first two starts as juvenile. The second of these wins was most impressive, a 10-length victory in a Newcastle novice event. He was still notably immature at that point, and a step up to the Group 2 Superlative Stakes at Newmarket needed to see where he stood resulted in disappointment. For some reason, he lost his way after that.

Now this Lion Of War is right back on track. He's an exciting horse. He won a decent handicap at Musselburgh two starts ago after stumbling at the start. It showed what he could do. He looked to be up against it and had a difficult trip but won comfortably.

This column always focuses on the numbers behind a horse's performance. And those which describe his latest second to Burdett Road at Royal Ascot simply must be heeded. This was a race which yielded a better time for the grade than rational expectations, and only another fast-improving horse defeated him.

Lion Of War gave away a ton of cheap ground in the early stages of the Golden Gates Handicap at Royal Ascot. He was drawn 17 on the outside, but Oisin Murphy took him all the way to the inside rail in a relatively short time while the other horses moved ahead. This would not have helped with the round track playing towards the outside running lanes all week. Lion Of War then did not have much room trying to get through but produced a fine surge to run the final furlong in 12.61sec – 0.27sec faster

Lion Of War under Oisin Murphy

than any other horse.

Lion Of War is a big, galloping unit but he has plenty of speed when he is in the clear. A mile and a half will suit him very well. He has tons of ability.

Analysing the Going stats

SOME FEATURES of Johnston Racing's approach will shift as the years roll by with Charlie as the sole trainer. Some will stay the same. One of the most consistent features of the yard's performance data is the correlation between the speed of the racing surface and the rate at which the horses win.

This has been in evidence again as June's impressive data has supplemented that of the first few months of the season.

As the table underneath shows, 2023 data (up to June 27) shows a familiar pattern. Strike rate (shaded column) increases with the firmness of the ground.

Going	Wins	Runners	SR	IV
Firm	2	4	50.0	3.10
Good to Firm	27	145	19.0	1.45
Standard	27	146	18.0	1.28
Standard to Slow	6	39	15.0	1.22
Good	14	91	15.0	1.25
Good To Soft	5	49	10.0	0.87
Soft	2	51	4.0	0.28
Heavy	0	4	0.0	0.00

Charlie Johnston's performance data by official Going type

We need to be a little careful here, however. I did not say that the yard's horses are 'suited by fast ground' because there is more to it than that, in my view. Fast conditions allow prominent racers to carry their speed further; field-sizes are also smaller, making for less competition for the lead. These are the factors which really drive ground-related performance - though, as I have pointed out before, there was a time when the occupancy of the yard was tilted towards the progeny of sires who tended to favour a firmer surface.

Nonetheless, while viewing the statistics in the table above, bear in mind that fast ground in 2023 has been more common more recently. So, an alternative analysis to the performance data is that the horses are simply getting fitter and more experienced. After all, the yard houses more later-developing horses than previously, judged by the number of two-year-old performances: between 2015 and 2018, Mark sent out 146, 153, 107 and 120 juvenile runners repectively before the end of June. Since 2020, that annual total has been 62, 79, 86 and 69 (the latter including data up to June 27).

On a soft surface, the yard's horses can be collectively just as effective, so long as the track still allows horses to carry their speed and the pressure on prominent racers does not become too great. Dubai Mile showed that with his great win on heavy ground in the Group 1 Criterium de Saint-Cloud last October. He is a horse who has a relatively low top speed for a horse of his ability, so soft conditions will favour him when they come round again.

Looking ahead to the big meeting early next month, it is no coincidence the yard does so well at Goodwood. The downland turf is springy and forgiving and favours speed, and the positioning of the bends, particularly in middle-distance races, helps horses who can save ground up front and are trying to control the tempo.