



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## SACRED ANGEL'S WIN SPARKS HAPPY MEMORIES

**S**ACRED ANGEL's win in the Group 3 Princess Margaret Stakes at the end of last month was important for Johnston Racing. Not simply because it confirmed what most of us already knew: that standards will not slip now that Charlie's is the sole name on the licence. But the media, owners', and friends' reaction to the win confirmed to me that we made the right decision when choosing to remove my name from the licence at the beginning of this year.

Many are hailing it as Charlie's first success at Group race level, despite the fact he had trained Group winners, including the Group 1 winner Dubai Mile, last year under the joint licence. I feared that this might be the case and realised part of the way through last season that, if we were to have a landmark success, such as a Derby winner or a trainers' championship, it would not mean as much to either one of us or to the business as it would if the licence was in one name. It seems I was right.

I have long argued that it would be beneficial to racing to allow corporate entities to be licensed to train horses and I still believe that. It would instill a better team spirit in the business, give staff a greater share in the success and true 'ownership' in the aims and objectives; and it would give trainers some identifiable goodwill which could be sold or passed on. Sadly, joint licences don't really take us any closer to that position.

Anyway, it is quite fun to think of it as Charlie's first Group winner as, by a quirk of fate, it has come in the same race, the Princess Margaret Stakes, that gave me my first Group success back in 1992 with Marina Park. That brought many great memories flooding back.

Marina Park was a very special horse for us and not just because of that first Group race win. Her next start was in the Prix Morny and a technical fault with the small aeroplane we had rented from another trainer meant that Deirdre and I, our then secretary Polly Savery (now with Aidan O'Brien) and jockey Dean McKeown were very late to arrive. Marina Park was already in the parade ring, saddled for the 'stand-in' jockey, Frankie Dettori. French rules differed from Britain and Dean McKeown was able to weigh out and the filly was resaddled. She finished third to the great Zafonic after Dean seemed to get confused by the presence of two different winning posts and stopped riding inside the final furlong. We always wondered if it might have been a different result if we had been unable to find a replacement plane.

It seems that Sacred Angel's next start might also be in the Prix Morny. Let's hope there are no such mishaps this time.

Thoughts of Marina Park also lead me to thinking of her late owner, Robert Kennedy, the tremendous support he gave to us and how he came to send us horses as a result of our overt efforts to market our business when we moved to



Marina Park wins the Princess Margaret Stakes in 1992

Middleham and started Mark Johnston Racing Ltd..

**W**E produced a brochure which we nicknamed our 'Spanish holiday resort brochure' as most of the buildings and facilities it featured hadn't been completed or didn't exist at all. I trailed through the Directory of the Turf and sent one to every owner who had

more than one trainer. Robert Kennedy's Greenland Park Stud listed Ian Balding and Peter Calver as their trainers and so received a brochure.

My uncle worked for our new business partner, Brian Palmer, at the time and so was taking a keen interest in our fledgling business. Ever the consummate salesman, Uncle Jimmy said that it was good to send out a brochure but every one of them had to be followed up with a

phone call. So, I set about calling every owner that I had sent a brochure to and I didn't get a single horse out of the exercise – at the time. One owner, Robert Kennedy, said he wasn't going to send me a horse, but he congratulated me on the effort I was making and said he thought it was really great that I followed my brochure up with a phone call. A year later, he sent his first horse.

**I**DON'T think that the Kingsley Klarion is posing any threat to the circulation of Private Eye but I can't help but feel a little pride in the fact that we squeezed an apology out of NatWest and a retraction of their claim that lending to trainers was not within the bank's 'appetite'.

I'll let Nigel Farage take the credit for raising the furore that brought the resignation of chief executive Dame Alison Rose – she might well have survived if it had been only the Kingsley Klarion snapping at her heels – but, no doubt, we did our bit in getting the bank to accept that it wasn't just politicians and public figures that they had wronged.

Actually, when I wrote my piece in last month's Klarion, I wasn't looking for a U-turn from the bank or even an apology. I'd have swapped that, and still would, for a proper explanation as to why they didn't want to do business with racehorse trainers. I wanted to 'out' them and, if they were anti-racing, force them to say so and make it clear to any of their major investors who didn't share their view.

## Hungry bankers? Don't bank on it!

Unlike the mainstream media, Gerry Hunt in his piece on page 10 makes much of the fact, and rightly so, that NatWest had to be bailed out by the Government and the public now own nearly 40% of the shares. It would, surely, be different if this were a privately owned bank.

**A**SUNDAY Times poll asked readers if banks should be free to drop customers whose views they disagreed with and 81% of the 40,000+ respondents said 'no', but I doubt if many thought about it. This is mob reaction, similar to that which led to the vast

majority of the public supporting nonsensical lockdown rules proposed by 'scientists' and adopted by politicians vying for votes during the Covid pandemic.

I can't see anything wrong with a bank, or any other supplier or service provider, being able to choose who they do business with, provided that the customers are afforded the same freedom of choice. It is virtually impossible for an individual, never mind a business, to operate in our society without a bank account and NatWest are one of the chosen few who have the privilege of being allowed by Government to offer this service and, as our piece so aptly points out, are protected by Government when they make a hash of it.

So, to my mind, NatWest should be free to reject customers whose views or business activities they oppose but, provided those are legally acceptable views or activities, Government should ensure that the customer has an alternative.

When you have read your Kingsley Klarion from cover to

cover, if you are still in need of some light entertainment, you might like to watch the movie, The Bank of Dave. It is based on the true story of the Barnsley man, Dave Fishwick, who struggles to set up a community bank to help local businesses. There has been quite a bit of dramatic licence used in producing the film but it is very entertaining and currently very relevant.

**I**T could, of course, be argued that racing has its own Bank of Dave in the shape of Weatherbys Bank. We moved our business banking to Weatherbys just over 20 years ago as Barclays were no longer in touch with our business requirements. It could be argued that Barclays had lost their 'appetite' for businesses like ours and Weatherbys Bank were new and hungry.

Weatherbys Bank seems to now be growing quickly and branching out well beyond the racing industry. They might find that there are quite a few NatWest clients ready for a change.