

# THE JAMES WILLOUGHBY COLUMN



## What will Charlie do next?

**M**OST TRAINERS approaching 100 winners by the end of July would be more than satisfied. Not so the ambitious Charlie Johnston. In an interview published by the Racing Post at the end of July, Charlie spoke of frustration at the talent drain from Kingsley Park during 2023.

The loss from the stable strength of leading horses such as Subjectivist, Dubai Mile and now Lion Of War has been keenly felt by the trainer, as he bids to establish himself in his first season as a solo licence holder. But the flow of winners is still strong.

Still, there was reason for a good deal of optimism as the yard prepared for the important August fixtures at Goodwood and York. Plenty of horses have shown progressive form and the potential for a bright future, even if they have not done it yet at Pattern level. With a new name on the licence at Kingsley Park, there is bound to be a transitional period while Charlie cements old relationships with owners and establishes new ones on his own terms.

### A changing landscape

There is no denying, however, that the landscape which confronts the young trainer is different from that in which Mark Johnston established the family's history-making yard. Now, more than ever, promising horses are being re-sold or re-located abruptly to territories where prize-money is greater than in Britain. And this is a trend unlikely to be reversed.

British racing has long traded mostly on prestige. Though there are laudable initiatives to boost the value of races here – such as revenue-sharing from pari-mutuel wagering though the World Pool – the reality has long been that racing in countries such as the USA, Australia and Hong Kong is a lot more lucrative for the owner. Now there is a bigger problem still in the shape of the domestic racing system in the Middle East, increasingly populated by horses whose connections would formerly have left them in Britain.

British racing is in the same boat as many sports leagues around the world who now face the issue of novel, cash-rich rival structures luring their best talent away. Most prominently so far is the case of the PGA Tour in golf. Having initially responded by excluding players who defected to the upstart LIV circuit from its plans, it has most recently caved in to financial pressure and is forming an alliance with its more financially powerful rival.

Football faces a similar struggle. Though UEFA, the governing body of European football, was able to stave-off

a European Super League in 2021, the appeal of novel set-ups in the Mideast and elsewhere has led to an exodus of talent from the more established clubs of Europe.

You may choose to view these developments as threatening the very fabric of sport. Or, from a different viewpoint, you could see them as re-structuring of the sporting landscape to reflect modern global wealth distribution. Either way, the politics of this issue are moot, but the situation is real and will increasingly permeate sports and their competitive structure.

### Guiding principles

Supporters of Johnston Racing have always found much more of interest besides just watching the horses run. The guiding principles by which Mark built the operation are just as fascinating, and they are widely applicable in many different settings.

Indeed, they have meant a huge amount to my own life for profoundly important reasons. Helping to improve the life of my severely autistic son is an exercise in decision-making under uncertainty, albeit one vastly different from training a racehorse. Still, it has befitted my family no end to follow similar ideas: establish a distinct way of operating based on logic and science; stay true to your principles; do not overreact to natural variance in results; stay calm in the face of adversity; express your opinions authentically; proceed by steps; and succeed by aggregation of effort.

For a racehorse trainer, a period when you are short of the quality of horse to compete at the usual level must be frustrating. And that is what Charlie is probably going through now, just at a time when he would like to be asserting himself with his sole name on the licence. Nevertheless, the winners have been flowing and will always flow. This could be a time merely for patience.

On the other hand, the reality is that winning top-level races at the rate the yard has done so in the past is now more difficult than ever. It may be harder to get the same value in the sales ring when so many other operators have budgets seemingly unbounded by real-world constraints. Although I would not want to bet against the Johnstons doing so.

If you look at the identity of trainers who win Group races over sprint distances and for juveniles, it is longer than the same list of those who win Group races over longer distances for three-year-olds. For good reason, the yard is known best for its middle-distance horses and stayers, but acquiring stock with this kind of potential increasingly requires a coterie of free-spending owners. Despite the yard performing incredibly well with horses owned by the Maktoum family, for instance, a reorganisation of their interests has led to fewer of their horses at Kingsley Park.

It is only necessary to recall a horse such as The Last Lion in 2016 to be reminded that Johnston Racing is highly capable of training fast, precocious horses who can offer



The Last Lion and Joe Fanning win the Middle Park Stakes in 2016

their owners premium secondary value, if that is the motivation. In general, however, this is not playing to the stable's strength because Johnston horses tend to thrive over multiple seasons and get tougher as they are rounded into indomitable athletes. For this process to happen, a trainer needs to have multiple seasons with a horse and a focus on winning, rather than making it look attractive as a commodity and seeing it moved on for profit.

Will Charlie tend to focus on this type of horse a little more in response to the realities of winning top races which now confront him?

## Paladin now becomes my One To Follow

**I**T WAS sad to discover that Lion Of War will no longer sport the Johnston tack after his run at Saratoga on August 5. It is my view that he should have won the valuable Golden Gates Handicap at Royal Ascot, instead of finishing second to Burdett Road. And he seemed just the sort of horse to thrive with Charlie as his trainer.

However, mindful that British and Irish-trained horses have already established a fine record in the New York Racing Association's Turf Trinity, it is easy to see why the Qatar Racing brains trust who own him want a piece of that tasty pie.

The Lion does not strike me as being a natural to be winging round sharp bends on fast ground, but then I thought the same about Godolphin's Yibir and his superior class still won him a Breeders' Cup Turf. It is not difficult to see the son of Roaring Lion in the same vein, I suppose.

In the hope that the two-year-old Paladin has a longer stay at Kingsley Park, I am going to install him as the replacement for Lion Of War as my 'one to follow'. A son of US Triple Crown winner Justify – the sire of hugely promising juveniles City Of Troy and Ramatuelle – he battled with great tenacity to win a Haydock maiden on soft going which he surely cannot enjoy. It was this which persuaded me to choose him, for not many horses can win on a surface which their action and pedigree suggests is less than ideal.

On my figures, I have only two winners for Charlie who have won on a softer surface: Knockbrev at Pontefract in April and Struth at Chester in May. I still retain faith in both those three-year-olds, despite their defeats since, and I reckon Paladin will also be running over middle distances when he is a three-year-old.

## High hopes for the Ebor meeting

**T**HE SECOND half of August is due to be warmer and drier than the dreadful July that we have experienced weather-wise. Along with Glorious Goodwood, York's Ebor meeting – which starts on August 23 – is a key fixture for the stable at this time of year.

In recent years, the Knavesmire has not always been the happiest hunting-ground for Johnston horses. When it rains, the surface seems to play against the kind of strong-galloping free-wheeling horse the stable produces. But when it is dry, the track surface is a different matter altogether. Then, prominent racers are in their element and early speed tends to hold. In fact, since 2009, 43 of Johnston Racing's 55 winners at York have come on such sound terrain.

So, with many of Charlie's horses having latent potential due to being held back by an unseasonably wet July, I am predicting that the Ebor meeting 2023, weather permitting, could be a successful one for the stable. Good luck to all concerned!