

A view from Italy on British racing

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us,
To see ourselfs as ithers see us!*

THESE FAMOUS lines, writes **John Scanlon**, from Robert Burns in his 1785 poem 'To A Louse' translates as: Oh, that someone would give us the gift of being able to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

The lines come to mind whenever we are able to observe someone who, though physically distant from a scene or situation upon which they are commenting, nonetheless hits the nail on the head with his or her thoughts on the subject.

And a classic example of that came in a letter Mark Johnston received from his Italian friend of many years, Emilio Aliverti. A fan of British racing for decades, Emilio set up a website inspired by the eight-time winner, Murghem, trained by Mark to land the Group 2 Geoffrey Freer Stakes at Newbury in August 2000.

Since 2007 he has been an advisor to Mark on all matters involving Italian racing since 2007 and has also assisted with catalogue study and sales preparations for Johnston Racing. He is particularly fond of Goodwood and has attended 'Glorious Goodwood' on a number of occasions.

Emilio's letter, edited only for clarity, ran as follows:

'Dear Mark, I have a few questions for you and I hope you can answer me.

I looked carefully at the Qatar Goodwood Festival and overall in my opinion the quality of the races has greatly decreased compared to the pre-Covid period. There have also been changes to the daily programmes, with races moved from traditional days. Maybe I'm too fond of the tradition of the meeting since 2006, but horse racing in the UK has always been tied to tradition.

I don't agree with many things, for example the introduction of a false rail at Goodwood and other racecourses; the rules on the whip; and the affordability checks on punters. British horse racing is taking a bad turn. As a fan of British racing I have the impression that racing itself accepts everything in a silent way and I don't think this is good. I think the path taken does not lead to a good future. I see race meetings with many Class 6 races that are not of benefit to the owners, given the poor prize-money.

Next year, from what I understand, the times of the races will be spread out during the afternoon. I don't see the point of it if the idea is to get people to bet more. You have to think that people have a set amount of money to bet with, and when it's finished, then no more bets. In Italy, with the increase in the minimum races and the modification of the times (we also ran in the morning), the end of the glorious horse racing period and the beginning of an endless descent began. I hope this is not what is in store for the UK too. I am seriously concerned about the future of horse racing in the UK.'

It's interesting to note that the to-ing and fro-ing over the

changing whip rules are making the news in Italy, as well as the developing saga over the potential effect of affordability checks on racing's finances. Emilio also highlights his concerns about the preponderance of low-grade races and questions plans to amend the timing of fixtures to avoid the 'shop window' period. His letter makes some excellent points, and he warns us how similar changes in Italy led to what he memorably describes as 'an endless descent' of the sport there.

Those words of the poet Burns at the start of this piece are well known, at least in Scotland, but it's worth remembering the next line of the poem:

'It wad frae mony a blunder free us, An' foolish notion.'

That translated means: It would free us from many mistakes, and foolish thinking.

It's hard to argue with that conclusion, but my favourite part of Emilio's letter is when he suggests that people in English horse racing accept everything 'in a silent way'. He's right, and that's not a healthy state of affairs at this crucial time for the sport.

Mark responds:

I AM not certain that we can assume from Emilio's letter that the debate over Britain's ever-changing whip rules has reached the Italian public or even the average Italian racing fan. Nor do I think that there would be more than a handful of Italian people aware of, let alone interested in, the government's proposed affordability checks on punters (as far as I am aware, bookmakers have introduced affordability checks ahead of any legislation)

Emilio is a dedicated fan of British racing. The kind of fan who is becoming all too rare at home in Britain let alone abroad. Sadly, people like Emilio are given little consideration by those who administer and market British racing. There is much more concern for the views and requirements of those who go racing only occasionally and do so simply to bet and drink, than there is for the true fans.

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It is interesting that Emilio is not a fan of the 'false rail' at Goodwood and at other tracks. The less informed might think that a false rail, which pushes the field out from the bend, opens up space on the inside, and spreads the runners over a greater area, could only be a good thing. I assume, for



Mark and Emilio at Glorious Goodwood in 2007

racecourses, it spreads the runners over more ground and saves areas of turf, particularly on the rail, from excessive damage. The administrators probably feel that it opens up space for horses coming from behind and, in so doing, reduces interference. But Emilio has noted that the races are not as exciting, horses don't run as straight, and there are probably fewer finishes involving horses that are close together and more naturally encouraged by the proximity of the other horse or horses.

I CAN see a bit of both sides. It can be a welcome opening for the individual that is boxed in on the rail and full of running, but I feel that races are less exciting to watch now when the horses are spread all over the track, whether that is as a result of a false rail or just from the action of the jockeys. And, when the false rail is badly positioned or angled, it can throw those on the outside out even wider causing them to lose an irrecoverable amount of ground.

I first noted the trend for coming up the middle of the track at York and, at the time, I thought it was down to the new drainage and a perceived track bias. Frankly, I couldn't understand it and I thought results were more random and the racing was poorer for it. It was only years later that I heard it said, in an article about Jamie Spencer, that it was a result of an agreement between jockeys, orchestrated by Michael and Richard Hills, to spread out and open up the races. I was particularly interested to note that Jamie Spencer, one of the greatest advocates of coming from behind, like Emilio, didn't seem to approve.

My views on the whip rules are surely well documented and I am surprised that Emilio even has to ask. I think I might

have written as much, if not more, than anyone else on the subject. As I say in this month's Straight Talking, I fear for the future of our sport and the thoroughbred breed and I believe that the BHA does more than any other organisation to perpetuate a negative public perception of whip use. In one previous article on the subject I quoted that other great Italian, Federico Tesio, who famously said: 'The Thoroughbred exists because its selection has depended, not on experts, technicians, or zoologists, but on a piece of wood: the winning post of the Epsom Derby. If you base your criteria on anything else, you will get something

else, not the Thoroughbred.'

Remove the crop for encouragement and you are no longer breeding for the best/fastest horse. Now you are breeding for the horse that is fastest and most willing to make an effort without encouragement or anything to initiate a flight response. Add in the BHA's trot-ups and you are now looking for the fastest, most willing, soundest horse. As Tesio explained, not the thoroughbred.

Frankly, I am sick of hearing about affordability checks but I have, albeit less vocally than some in the racing media would like, made my views clear. I think affordability checks are an affront to basic civil liberties and I am astounded that any government thinks it is reasonable to impose checks on how people spend their money. As I have said in a previous article, how can they justify affordability checks on gambling and not on the purchase of cigarettes, alcohol or, for that matter, any other product or service? Maybe there is more to come.

THAT said, I think the Racing Post and others are doing untold damage to racing's reputation by continually bleating on about it and suggesting that our sport only exists for betting and that major owners are leaving in droves because they only own horses if they can bet without the intrusion of affordability checks. I am fascinated that the racing industry appear to be making much more noise about affordability checks than the bookmakers themselves and, as I say above, the government has not yet legislated. Are the bookmakers, perhaps, being more intrusive than they need to be in order to bolster opinion in advance of any legislation? ■