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A Personal View



MARTIN TREW lambasts the racing press. A founding member of the Racing Post editorial team and formerly a regular contributor to The Times, Martin is now retired.

WHAT ON earth is the matter with the racing press? Has it lost its marbles? Or just its balls? The Kingsley Klarion's superlative scoop in last month's magazine lies open on my desk, exciting my admiration and envy for the umpteenth time.

The investigation by Gerry Hunt into the goings-on at NatWest between April and July of this year was an object lesson in the art of reporting. It was also a stinging rebuke to the lethargy of today's racing media. Did I say lethargy? Wrong word. Try complete catatonia.

As the dust settles on NatWest's bungled attempt to blacklist the entire bloodstock industry – the facts uncovered by the Klarion leave little doubt that this was indeed their intention – the reluctance of the racing media to follow up the story up is almost as troubling as the conduct of NatWest itself. As far as I am aware, the Klarion's revelations were not picked up by a single newspaper or racing channel.

Inexplicably, and most unsettlingly, they were ignored by the Racing Post, once a respectable trade paper, but now reduced to the role of errand boy for the online gambling industry. In effect, the Klarion exclusive – impeccably-sourced and a must-read for all racing professionals – sank like the proverbial stone. For those not on the magazine's mailing list, it might as well not have been published.

There is a convention among journalists that forbids one to write about one's colleagues. I find myself obliged to disregard it. The case requires it, and anyway I retired 30 years ago.

NATWEST's aberrant behaviour has been attributed to a period of internal chaos, which the sackings that eventually ensued should resolve. The demoralisation of the racing press feels more long-term. Within that tight-knit parish, pusillanimity appears to have become habitual. In my day there was an invisible motto over the press room door that read: *Abandon hope all ye who enter here.* (We liked to imagine ourselves as wild and piratical). I fear that that invisible motto now reads: *On no account frighten the*

horses. Banish curiosity, obey the party line, leave journalism (in any meaningful sense) to others.

Does this matter? Are we not pretty accustomed to it? Who says racing needs a lively, energetic press corps whose ultimate loyalty is not to the sport's vested interests but to the truth? Well, some are of the view (I am among them) that the enfeeblement of the racing press has contributed to racing's decline; has accelerated, as well as reflected, its drift to the margins of British sport.

There are reasons why newspapers started limiting the space granted to racing. First, there was clear evidence that racing's core audience was shrinking. But it was also the case that the stuff being filed by racing correspondents was perceived to be incredibly dull.

THE business of journalism has been defined as the placing of facts in the public domain that someone does not want published. I sense almost no appetite for that principle among today's crop of racing journalists, who seem primarily interested, even exclusively interested, in betting.

There are exceptions. Lydia Hislop is not just a fine broadcaster but a dauntless and provocative essayist (when she finds the time). Emma Berry, of Thoroughbred Daily News, is also blessed with news sense. It was Emma who, during Royal Ascot, revealed what some high-ups in the bloodstock world were anxious to conceal: the identity of the mystery owner of the winners of the Queen's Vase and the Gold Cup. Wathnan Racing, it turned out, was none other than the Emir of Qatar. A not insignificant discovery, which Emma's colleagues were quick to treat as common knowledge – once she had done the donkey

work, i.e. placed her professional neck on the line.

I do not underestimate the difficulties faced by racing journalists. They encounter, in an acute form, dilemmas which are common to all specialist reporters. To obey or not to obey industry spin. To recycle or resist industry cant. To perpetuate or explode cherished myths. Take the myth beloved of racing's promoters that there is a Broader Audience out there somewhere, waiting to be harnessed. It still informs the tone of ITV Racing's entire output.

For the racing press these dilemmas are unusually tough to resolve. For ours is an industry which delights in embracing mavericks, provided they are not wearing a press badge. This is our best clue to the unsolved mystery of why racing coverage is so toothless and bland. And this is why sports editors have felt justified in re-assigning space hitherto devoted to racing to other sports. Our grandparents experienced sport mainly through newspapers. But with the advent of television the prestige which had attached to sportswriters was rapidly transferred to TV pundits. Writers were forced to redefine their role, which they duly did, with conspicuous success in the case of cricket, and nil success in the case of racing.

ONE of the most significant racing stories of the 1990s was the one unfolding in the enclosures and in the bars beneath the grandstands. A new kind of racegoer was creating a new kind of atmosphere. Racecourse bars became fantastically congested, drinking was spilling out on to the lawns; meanwhile the viewing steps around the paddock were strangely denuded. The alienation of racing's core audience was underway.

Laura Thompson, the biographer and social historian, sensed at once what was happening and wrote about it. But hers was a lone voice. The press was so focussed on the racing, it failed to notice the hand-grenade under its nose. Thus, a racing story of seismic importance was politely ignored by the racing press. Just like the Klarion's NatWest scoop last month.

And that is my point. It is the pattern. ■

The opinions expressed in A Personal View are not necessarily those of the Kingsley Klarion or Johnston Racing. If you would like to contribute on a racing-related subject, please contact us at Klarion@johnston.racing.