



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

GROSSLY UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR

I WAS pleased to read in the Racing Post that the BHA have taken action against a social media user, Michael Wheble, and have banned him for life for sending abusive messages to jockeys and trainers.

The ban means that he can no longer attend a British racecourse, or any BHA licensed premises, and others would be in breach of the BHA code of conduct if they have any association with him in connection with British racing. My first reaction was that it is a meaningless punishment as I couldn't imagine that he would be the type of person who would attend race meetings. Furthermore, I wondered how racecourse personnel could be expected to recognise him and prevent him from entering if he did choose to go racing. I even wondered if the BHA know what he looks like. Did he attend a hearing to receive his ban? I couldn't imagine that he would, but maybe I am wrong. The BHA probably know exactly who he is. I think I do.

AS soon as I read of the ban, I looked through my old, undeleted emails and found that I have been hearing from Michael Wheble, or 'Michael John Wheble

MBE' as he sometimes signed himself, for at least seven years. Actually, it was all fairly tame stuff when compared to some of the emails, text messages, and phone calls I have received on a fairly regular basis over the years since I started training horses. He never expressed the desire that I should 'get cancer' and he never threatened to stab me or any of the jockeys who rode for me. He didn't even attempt to cast aspersions on my weight, body shape, or Scottish nationality.

His emails were all about what he considered to be my inability to train horses with the occasional suggestion that I was a cheat and that he intended to report me and expose my underhand activities to the BHA. How ironic that it should be him and not me that the BHA

should investigate and ban.

Anyway, having found a few of his emails, I decided to stick his name into Google just in case Michael John Wheble is his real name and he really does have an MBE. And there he was, Michael John Wheble MBE (born 1949), retired Racing Manager. That is 'racing manager' as in someone who manages the racing side of a greyhound stadium, not a racing manager as we know it in our sport but, nonetheless, it has to be the same man. I found his Facebook page and his Twitter

“Those bullies have no regard whatsoever for the people they are abusing or the vulnerabilities that they might have”

THE YEARLINGS sales season is underway and first indications, from Deauville and Doncaster, are that prices are still rising. It is hard to understand when there is so much talk of doom and gloom over declining prize-money and spiralling running costs but the bloodstock market has always been a bit of a law unto itself.

Charlie and I have been struggling to get a look-in at the first two sales and it is only thanks to our new owner, Nurlan Bizakov, that we are coming home with as many horses as at this point last

Panning for gold



year. But Deauville results can be very deceptive and it is often said that we never know the true strength of the market until

Newmarket in October when the sales season is almost over.

In any case, if average prices are up, we will just have to work harder, sifting through the grit to find the nuggets and gems. As always, I'm sure we will be frustrated by our inability to afford the horses that we want most but there will be stars among the ones we can afford. Our job is to spot them and it is a challenge which I thoroughly enjoy.

(now X) account with numerous posts about jockeys.

Surely, if I could find him so easily, the Racing Post must have known exactly who he is. He was once racing manager at Leicester and Coventry greyhound stadia and then he moved to Oxford and Ramsgate. Now he sends abusive email to jockeys and trainers. What a come down. Was that not news?

The fact the Racing Post chose not to tell us much about him would almost make you think the paper has more sympathy for those who are sending these emails and texts than for the jockeys and trainers who are on the receiving end. Many years ago, being sickened by the abuse that I, my family, and some of those who work with us were receiving, I wanted to hit back and I took it upon myself to try to identify some of those who were sending these messages. Most are anonymous and hide their identities very well with fake email addresses and social media accounts, but whenever I could trace the culprit and get a confirmed name, address, email address, or phone number, I would publish the details on our website. That didn't go down well with some in the racing media who, believe it or not, accused me of being the bully.

AND why did the BHA choose to ban this man in particular? As I have said, his messages were really quite tame when compared to the many, really vile items of correspondence that we receive. Was it simply that he was easy to trace whereas most are very difficult to identify? Unfortunately, the internet providers, social media platforms and even the police are fairly unhelpful when it comes to tracing these people.

I make no apology for the antipathy that I feel towards them. I consider them to be among the worst kind of bullies. They have no regard whatsoever for the people they are abusing or the vulnerabilities that they might have. I have seen suggestions that I and others should commit suicide, threats of violence, and every kind of discriminatory language. There is no telling what harm such messages might do to trainers or jockeys who are suffering health or anxiety issues at the time.

I don't think the law is strong enough in this area and, while the BHA are clearly committed to doing all they can to combat this activity, there needs to be a greater sanction than a ban from attending racecourses and licensed premises. Let's face it, the vast majority of people who send these abusive messages are disgruntled punters – we know to expect the abuse whenever a short-priced favourite is beaten. The culprits should be banned from betting, from having an account with a bookmaker, subscribing to Racing TV, or, dare I say, subscribing to the Racing Post.



Whip controversy mishandled

I WHOLEHEARTEDLY agreed with every word Angus Gold said in criticising the new 'whip' rules after Jim Crowley's spectacular ride on Hukum in the King George V and Queen Elizabeth Stakes drew the wrath of the BHA stewards, but what a pity that he was not expressing those views at the beginning of the year, before the rules were changed, or indeed many years before. In my opinion, the future of our sport and of the thoroughbred breed is being threatened by those who mistakenly think they are addressing negative public perception of racing when, in fact, they are creating the very perception – that horses are being abused – by writing rules which punish jockeys based on an arbitrary number of slaps with the riding crop rather than having any consideration whatsoever for the well-being of the animal, its performance, or its condition during and after the race.

I have been speaking out against these rules for 27 years, since the first three jockeys in the 1996 2,000 Guineas – including Jason Weaver on Bijou D'Inde – were banned for using the crop more than 10 times. The number has been gradually reduced and the penalties steadily increased ever since with the effect that the public are, understandably, led to believe that a jockey who gets a 20-day ban and a £10,000 fine for hitting a horse with a cushioned riding crop must have injured, hurt, or at least compromised the welfare of that horse.

Influential owners, breeders and their managers, like Angus Gold, should never have accepted the route that the racing administrators were taking us down. They should have ensured that that particular stable door was kept shut from the outset. When it was so obvious at the time to a rookie trainer, why couldn't the movers and shakers in the industry see it coming?