



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

VALUE EVEN HARDER TO FIND

THE YEARLING sales season rumbles on and will reach its crescendo this month with the Tattersalls Book 1 and Book 2 yearling sales which, as I said last month, ultimately determine the true state of the European yearling market.

We have become known for buying yearlings on 'spec' and

I have never really determined whether that is a result of having very few firm orders or if it is the other way around: that we don't get orders because the owners know that we will go and buy the horses anyway.

Either way we are left with little choice now as I know that, if we don't have a sufficient number of yearlings at the end of the yearling sales, it will be very difficult indeed to find any value for money privately or at the breeze-ups if we have an owner who wants a horse. We have, therefore, planned to try and buy the same number of yearlings as last year but it is already looking like that may be difficult to

achieve. Last year at Goffs Ireland Orby sale we bought 13 yearlings with four more coming from the Sportsman's sale. This year the renamed Orby Book 1 yielded just seven purchases and we didn't buy any in Orby Book 2. That is quite a deficit to make up, especially when you consider that we bought 26 from Tattersalls Book 1 and Book 2 last year.

The frustration at not being able to afford the ones I want to buy, even on those occasions when I think they are value for money, is not a new thing for me. I have had to put up with that for as long as I have been a trainer and, of course, I am not alone but I remain determined to maintain our standards and minimum criteria even

if rising prices put more horses beyond our reach. Unfortunately, however, the same effort goes into studying the catalogue and slogging round the barns for seven purchases as for 17 and that takes a bit of a toll.

All that said, I still enjoy the yearling sales and Goffs

Ireland was particularly enjoyable this year thanks to us being able to stay at the new Goffs Club hotel, a short walk from the sales ring, rather than having to drive to and from Naas every day. That brought back memories of the old Ambassador Hotel which was just across the road from the Goffs sales complex, with an underpass providing access across the dual carriageway.

I USED to stay there with quite a large group of owners which invariably included Ron Huggins, Paul Venner and Mick Doyle. Most would be there to buy horses and it took a lot of pressure off me as many of my purchases would be sold on at fall of the hammer or soon afterwards. Staying on site this year brought back many great memories of those days, of the purchasing of Double Trigger, Double Eclipse, and Fruits of Love; of racing Ron, in our little hired hatchbacks, through the car parks and the underpass to the Ambassador; of Ron riding the statue of Be My Guest; of the many pints of Guinness sunk; and of the banter and, dare I say, arguments that went on till the early hours of the morning.

Maybe the convenience of the excellent new Goffs Club hotel will attract a few owners back to the Orby and maybe some new ones. I would enjoy the 'craic' but I'm not sure if I now have the constitution for the Guinness and the late nights.

“I still enjoy the yearling sales and Goffs Ireland was particularly enjoyable this year”

FLICKING THROUGH old copies of Owner Breeder magazine, I came across chairman Julian Richmond-Watson's leader in the July issue in which he discusses artificial insemination (AI) and a recent visit he made, along with other TBA board members, to the Stallion AI Services operation in Whitchurch, Shropshire. I had also been discussing the topic with owner Jeanette Matthews-Griffiths when she visited her horses recently and so I thought I would share some observations on the subject and perhaps open further debate.

Julian starts by pointing out that AI is prohibited worldwide in thoroughbreds but that he feels it is important to keep abreast of advances in breeding methods in other breeds and species. He notes some of the practical advantages of AI such as reduced risk of disease, boosting welfare by reducing travelling of mares and foals, and aiding a reduction in the industry's carbon footprint. Ultimately, he remains in favour of restricting the Stud Book to animals which are the result of natural service on the grounds that it provides some physical limit to the number of

Protecting the breed

foals that one stallion can sire and, in particular, because he feels that it helps protect the integrity of the breed by reducing opportunities for gene manipulation.

Jeanette breeds dressage and sports horses, along with thoroughbreds, at her and Tom's Wadacre stud and she would like to see AI in thoroughbreds. She listed the same advantages as Julian but added that it would considerably reduce costs for breeders and give more breeders access to the 'best' genes.

I AM very anti-AI. I may not remember much that I was taught in vet school but a few things have stuck with me from the lectures on artificial insemination. Firstly, I think the history of artificial insemination is very interesting. Despite the current ban on AI in thoroughbreds, it is actually believed to have started in the breed. In the early days of thoroughbred breeding, when it was the stallions rather than the mares that

travelled, grooms would place a sponge in the mare's vagina after covering to soak up excess sperm. They would then sell the sponge and it would be placed in the vagina of the recipient mare.

The other little anecdote that stuck with me from those lectures was that commercial turkeys can only be bred artificially. Years of breeding, using artificial insemination, for a bird with a big breast has led to a situation in which the male is unable to make contact with the female genitalia.

THIS demonstrates how artificial insemination can allow the development of characteristics which would be precluded by natural service. The same would apply, for example, in horses with unsound hind limbs. No matter what limits you put on the number of mares that can be covered with AI, that limit will be applied to all stallions, sound or otherwise.

To my mind, the worst situation occurs in racing greyhounds where dogs are allowed to continue 'breeding' long after they are dead. For all I know, the same may apply in sports horses and cattle.

Ruling against Tom

JOHAN SCANLON in Off The Bridle supports Tom Marquand's call for a cessation of the one-meeting rule. I'm not sure if I agree and that is, at least in part, down to the fact that it is Tom Marquand, who is currently sitting second in the Jockeys' Championship race (if you can really call it a championship or a race – William Buick is 28 clear), who is calling for it.

When the rule was first introduced, I was against it as it impacts directly on us. It means that we are sometimes struggling to find experienced jockeys for inexperienced horses and, on busy days we often see 'second division' jockeys riding in 'first division races', and I don't think that is good for the sport. However, I had to reconsider my view when Franny Norton, a jockey who never complains about having to go to the furthest flung meeting for one ride, said that he was in favour. Franny said he could now concentrate better on his job and his rides, rather than constantly thinking about getting to the next meeting on time, the traffic conditions, and the best route. Sometimes it was like Wacky Races (Are you old enough to remember Wacky Races? Wasn't it great?).

John cites the example of Redcar and Newcastle being on the same day, but it is not the jockeys who might get one or two rides at each meeting who are arguing for the rule to be rescinded, it is one who thinks he can get six rides at both.

It is admirable that a jockey should have such a work ethic and I like to see those who put in the graft getting on in life and championships. But if Tom Marquand wants more opportunities to narrow the gap between him and the leader, why isn't he calling for the championship to be extended over a more meaningful period? The current 'championship' runs from May 6 to October 21, a period of 24 weeks and so not even half a year, and misses out a number of major meetings. Why? That certainly isn't good for the sport.



Tom Marquand - second in the jockeys' table