



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

GETTING IT RIGHT AT THE START

LAST MONTH I discussed the 'Nanny' BHA and queried what they should and should not be regulating. I fear that it is a subject we may need to visit again in the coming months but, for the moment, I want to look at the changes they have made to starting procedures: an area which I think we would all agree does rightfully fall within their remit.

On November 23 they informed trainers by email that *'the BHA Board has approved several changes to the start rules, following a review of stalls and starting procedures over a 12-month period'*.

For Flat racing, the rule changes mostly involve requests to be loaded late and are designed to reduce the number of requests for a late load on grounds of poor behaviour in the stalls as this can delay the start and may be disadvantageous to the well-behaved horses who load in the normal sequence and are made to wait for those that are being loaded late. The BHA also clearly recognised that trainers were requesting late loads for tactical reasons and that this should be prevented if at all possible.

I must admit that

Charlie and I have 'played' the system in the past to get a horse passed for 'lifetime late load status' but principally for horses that we deemed to require a blindfold, in order to combat restlessness in the starting stalls, and to avoid such a horse being loaded first.

A few years ago the rules were changed to make horses for which a blindfold is requested load first. For those that were requiring a blindfold because they were inclined to get upset in the stalls, this made no sense at all. There are two principal reasons for using a blindfold in the starting stalls. Firstly, the blindfold can be used to aid loading and, as those which are difficult to load are the most likely to delay the start, it makes perfect sense to load these horses first and early. But a blindfold is also used for its calming effect on a fractious horse and so has always been the most useful 'tool' for

settling a horse which gets upset in the stalls.

To load a horse which is known to get upset in the stalls first makes no sense at all and greatly increases the risk to horse and jockey. It also, of course, risks considerable delay to the start.

I have never understood that, even

for horses that have been noted to be unsettled in the stalls at the races and where the starter has recommended the use of a blindfold, the rules require such a horse to be loaded first. Prior to that rule being introduced, we would immediately reach for the blindfold when a horse was noted to be unsettled in the stalls at home and we would discuss its behaviour with the starter and request a blindfold in races. In recent years, since the load-first rule was introduced, we have avoided the blindfold at all costs unless we were 'taking a ticket' (a stalls criteria failure) and getting a late load with a blindfold. We will no longer be able to request a late load unless the horse has previously demonstrated behavioural issues in a race in Great Britain or it has undergone a pre-race starting stalls assessment and has demonstrated a behavioural issue. They do not appear to have told us where these starting stalls assessments will take place, who will conduct them, or at what cost.

DESPITE the difficulties that these rules might present for us, it was actually the changes to jump race start procedures which first grabbed my attention. After four pages on starting stalls rules and procedures, by which time I am sure most jump trainers would have decided that there was nothing there for them, a short paragraph told us: *'Effective immediately, BHA starters will no longer carry the hunting crop during jump starts. The hunting crop was previously used very sparingly, and the Starts Review Working Group felt there was no longer a need*

to continue to carry it during the starting process'.

It was not long before we saw what might be a serious consequence of this change. Two days after this announcement, superstar chaser and odds-on favourite Shishkin refused to race in a Grade 2 chase at Ascot, turning it into a three-runner fiasco. The starter's assistant was clearly seen running in behind the horse frantically waving her arms to no effect.

I have since watched all available footage of the starts of his previous races and, where the starter's assistant is visible, I can make out, because I am looking for it, the hunting crop. It is held low to the ground or, at most, out to the side. No running and no waving of arms or crop.

I assume they have removed this piece of equipment due to their obsession with public perception, but I have to wonder how many members of the public were ever aware of its presence or its purpose. It isn't as if the starter's assistant ever hit a horse with it. They rarely ever raised it but could, presumably, crack it if required. Shishkin and other horses, on the other hand, almost certainly were aware of its presence and, on November 25 at Ascot, it seems likely that Shishkin perceived its absence.

I wonder how many people went to Ascot that day, or turned on their TV, just to see that horse run. Few, if any, will know that it may have been a change to BHA starting procedures that denied them the pleasure of watching him perform.

“To load a horse which is known to get upset in the stalls first makes no sense at all”

A YEAR ago I wrote about the effect of weight carried on horses. For the first few years as a trainer I had taken the accepted principles of handicapping literally and thought that a pound or two had a predictable effect on performance. It seemed logical that, if a stone mattered, a pound must matter, or even an ounce.

Years of observation made me realise that, in practice, this was not the case but it was only quite recently that I came up with what I believe to be a logical explanation for why it is so. Last December (https://www.johnston.racing/wp-content/uploads/2022_12_Straight-Talking_December-2022.pdf) I explained my theories using identical cars with different power plants but the same top speed limiter as an example and I was mightily relieved when James Willoughby agreed with my interpretation.

Now I am going to dare to question the value of race times when seeking to assess the ability of horses and say that what seems like the most objective and logical measure doesn't seem to be a great indicator of ability in practice.

The value of timing

Back in September James wrote on the subject. He is a very firm believer in the value of times, although he might accept that whole race times without sectionals are less meaningful. He quoted Willie Brown as saying 'most of the quick ones turn out to be the good ones', although Willie was, of course, talking about breeze-ups where horses are timed over a distance of around two furlongs and the objective for vendors is to set the best possible time over that short distance.

At the other end of the spectrum you have Luca Cumani,

who famously said that 'the only time that matters is time spent in jail'. I am caught somewhere between the two and am still trying to find an explanation for why race times are, to my mind, such a poor predictor of ability and why we are commonly duped into thinking that a horse who clocked a great time on debut is going to go on to be top class.

I HAVE no difficulty in explaining why timing horses on the gallops would be pointless unless you are going to race them at home and, if you do that, the injury rate would be unacceptable. As is often said, 'they are all fast when they are passing trees'. It is only when we push them to something like their limit that the exceptional horse will reveal itself.

American trainers are renowned for 'clocking' their horses in training but, of course, for most of us in Europe the injury rate which is taken for granted in the US would be considered unacceptable. No doubt, the construction of their tracks is a major factor in their injury rates and their liberal use of drugs is

often cited as playing a part, but I cannot help but think that training against the 'clock' must also come into it.

Bill O'Gorman, in his latest book 'From Start To Finish: What Works is Real', touches on the subject. He points out that course records are often set by 'relatively ordinary animals', that Frankel never posted an exceptional time, and that, when course records do occur, the placed horses often also break the existing record. He puts this down to the way races are run, especially in Europe, and this would make me even more inclined to believe that a whole race time, without a breakdown into sections and a detailed analysis, may be fairly meaningless. I wonder whether Frankel, while failing to produce any exceptional overall time, might invariably have shown so much speed in part of the race that the opposition were beaten a long way from home.

For me, the jury is still out and I will continue to ponder on how to interpret times and what correlation there is with ability and, ultimately, greatness. In any case, I'm sure there is endless scope for further debate on the subject.