

# Review of the Year



With effect from January 1, 2023, Charlie Johnston took over as the sole holder of the training licence at Kingsley Park, bringing to an end the brief, but successful, 'training partnership' between Charlie and his father Mark which had operated throughout 2022.

At a stroke, Johnston Racing's 2023 campaign assumed a much greater significance. Could Charlie, in what would be reckoned by many to be his 'rookie' year, maintain the levels of success achieved by his father across the previous 30-plus years? Thankfully, but not at all unexpectedly, the answer to that question turned out to be a resounding 'yes'. However, the year was not without its frustrations for the new master of Kingsley Park.

Here, as told by JOHN SCANLON, is how the story of last year unfolded.

## January

The yard got off to a decent start to the 2023 campaign with seven victories recorded in January. The honour of landing the first win of the year went to the seven-year-old **Asdaa** who won a Kempton

handicap on January 4, being just the second runner sent out by Charlie under his sole name. The third runner, **Demilion**, was also a winner, this time at Wolverhampton.

Asdaa was very much the star of the show on track in January, as the Dutch Art

gelding also scored at Chelmsford and finished second at Kempton.

The Kingsley Park Partnerships also secured a first win of 2023 when KP31's **Timewave** won at Kempton on January 17.

Early in the month Charlie was interviewed in depth by Nick Luck for his 'Luck On Sunday' programme on Racing TV. While Charlie agreed that his father's astonishing record of success meant he had 'big shoes to fill', he pointed out that the day-to-day routine at Kingsley Park wasn't going to change. He acknowledged that the spotlight was going to be on the yard in the early stages of his tenure.

'There will be an added importance for the next 18 months or so,' he conceded.

'There will be more scrutiny on the results this year than there has been for quite a few years, perhaps.'

Charlie's own determination to succeed came across strongly in a measured and confident tone.

At the end of the month, Johnston Racing's vital statistics for the year to date were as follows: Wins 7; British runners 40; Prize-money £55,710.



Outbreak wins in fine style at Lingfield

## February

A quieter month for the yard with just 38 domestic runners. Nonetheless, those runners produced five wins, one more than in February 2022, the pick of which was **Outbreak**'s impressive success in a decent handicap at Lingfield.

Credit is also due to Kirsten Rausing's **Krona**, who landed back-to-back handicap wins at Kempton and Southwell during the month. The wins saw her official rating jump from 60 to 76 in one fell swoop.

The great **Subjectivist** returned to the racecourse. Carrying top weight in the Red Sea Turf Handicap in Riyadh, the six-year-old's first race since winning the Gold Cup

at Ascot followed a break of 618 days in which he had been intensively treated for his injury. Racing keenly at the head of affairs, he faded when asked to find more by Joe Fanning, but this was an important step on the road to another tilt at Ascot's premier prize.

Meantime, in the Kingsley Klarion both Mark Johnston and yours truly tackled the issue of affordability checks in our respective columns. It's sad to think that little progress would be made in resolving this existential threat to the racing industry across the rest of the year.

The month ended with the year's tally of winners standing at 12 from 78 runners, while total prize-money rose to £123,898.

## March

In March, the stable recorded five wins from a total of 41 runners, the same number of winners as in March 2022. Three were ridden by Franny Norton, the popular Liverpoolian jockey riding as well as ever in his 53rd year.

However, it was Andrea Atzeni who partnered the yard's most notable winner of the month. Conceding weight to all of his rivals, the four-year-old **The Gatekeeper** made a winning return at Newcastle, no fewer than 625 days after his last outing, which had been when running in the Coventry Stakes at Royal Ascot as a juvenile. Rightly, this was hailed as a magnificent training performance by Charlie, and it wouldn't be the last time this horse would grab the headlines during the year.

Over at Meydan, **Subjectivist** lined up for the Dubai Gold Cup against a strong field. Again he raced too keenly, but he was in no way disgraced in finishing third behind the winner, Broome, in a race in which Subjectivist's own course record was lowered. Jockey Joe Fanning pronounced himself delighted with his partner's effort.

'Off that, we can hopefully look forward with a little confidence to the season ahead,' Joe remarked.

In a fascinating contribution in the Klarion, James Willoughby explained why he believed 'ordinary handicaps are killing interest in the sport', and set out his proposals for an alternative system.

'The biggest prizes in the sport should go to the best horses, wherever possible,' he argued. 'Not the best horses considering the weights.'

BHA take note, please.

By the end of the first quarter the yard had amassed 17 wins from 119 runners, with British prize-money rising to £187,004. For his efforts in Meydan in finishing third, Subjectivist had earned more than £83,000.

Asdaa was the first winner of 2023





Continued from page 17

## April

With the return of racing on turf the number of runners duly increased and the monthly total of winners equalled that of April 2022; the 16 wins came from 104 runners, nine fewer than in the previous April campaign.

Pride of place among those winners has to go to **Dear My Friend**. The Pivotal colt won the Burradon Stakes at Newcastle to give the yard its first success of the year in a Listed event. The owners of Wadacre Stud were also delighted when their homebred duo, **Wadacre Gomez** and **Wadacre Grace**, completed a memorable double at Gosforth Park on April 3.

April also saw the first juvenile winner of the year, appropriately enough courtesy of the homebred **Yorkshire Terrier**, who landed a novice event at Southwell.

This month saw another Middleham Open Day in which the yard was again happy to participate. More than 3,000 visitors flocked to the town for the event which raised £27,000 to support the vital work of Racing Welfare.

April's issue of the Klarion also featured a Kingsley Kickback 'Handicap Special', with some fantastic contributions inspired by James Willoughby's earlier, thought-provoking article.

By the end of the month, Johnston Racing's tally of 2023 winners had risen to 33 from 223 runners. Boosted by the increased opportunities afforded by the return of the Flat and by victories such as **Finn's Charm's** Musselburgh win on April 8, prize-money of more than £272,000 was won in April, boosting the yearly total to £459,825 after the first four months of the year.

## May

With 137 runners in the month, the number of winners increased too. There were 19 wins, three less than in 2022, but two up on the 2021 figure. Three of those wins came in Class 2 events. There were decent handicap wins for **The Gatekeeper** at Newmarket and for **Urban Sprawl** at Goodwood, while **Politico** landed a valuable juvenile maiden at Chester.

Also at Goodwood, **Barnwell Boy** made a huge impression in landing a novice event easily, despite showing distinct signs of greenness.

Johnston Racing was represented in both



Dear My Friend, winner of the Burradon Stakes at Newcastle

Guineas at Newmarket. **Dance In The Grass** ran in the 1,000 Guineas, where she finished fifth behind Mawj. She seemed to run the perfect Oaks trial, staying on well after becoming a little outpaced. Sadly, the Listed Star Stakes winner was not seen out again after Newmarket. Meanwhile, the Criterium de Saint-Cloud winner, **Dubai Mile**, contested the 2,000 Guineas on his seasonal reappearance. He also ran well, prominent for a long way before being beaten into fifth.

In the Klarion, vet John Martin reported on a trip to the equine hospital in Newmarket to see a horse undergo surgery on a broken leg. Johnston Racing is rightly proud of the quality of its own veterinary provision, and is happy to include the cost of all referrals, including surgery, if required, in its inclusive daily rate of training fees.

By the end of May, wins for the year had moved on to 52, from 360 runners. Prize-money for the month was a considerable £383,704, taking the yearly total to £843,529.

## June

This proved to be, numerically, the most successful month of the whole year, with

34 winners from 191 runners. On top of that, 23 horses were placed second. The previous year's winners' total was 24. **Alpina Express** won three handicaps, while **Knightwood**, **Book Of Tales** and **Gone** all chipped in with two successes each.

In the Derby at Epsom, the yard was represented both by **Dubai Mile** and **Dear My Friend**. After the promise of his Guineas run, Dubai Mile proved disappointing, fading into ninth after racing prominently. Dear My Friend dwelt at the start and could never really get involved in the race.

But with winners flowing, Johnston Racing enjoyed a five-timer on June 13 with wins at Brighton, Southwell, Ayr (2) and Wetherby.

The yard had to endure a frustrating time at Royal Ascot. **Subjectivist** ran a brave race in the Gold Cup, leading for a long way before giving best to Courage Mon Ami and Coltrane in the closing stages. **Lion Of War** finished second in the Golden Gates Stakes, while **Urban Sprawl** took third place in the Britannia Stakes. As a Group 1 winner, **Dubai Mile** faced a tough task attempting to give weight all round in the King Edward VII Stakes, so there was no disgrace in finishing fourth to the subsequent

Champion Stakes winner, King Of Steel. The Royal Ascot performances of **Subjectivist** and **Dubai Mile** were to prove their last before retirement, while after running in the Saratoga Derby International at the beginning of August, **Lion Of War** remained in the United States to continue his career there.

The Klarion featured the indefatigable Franny Norton, and carried a 'Kickback' special described by Mark as 'our best ever'. The subject? Racecourses and their non-racing activities.

At the half-year mark, Charlie's winners' tally had moved on to 86 wins from a total of 551 runners. Prize-money won was the best of the year at £508,683, pushing the total for the year to that point to £1,352,212.

## July

In recent years, the Johnston juggernaut has been seen to best effect in July, where the usual drier, sounder surfaces tend to play to the yard's strengths. So the almost non-stop rainfall throughout the month took its toll and the total of winners was a damp squib 13, from 129 runners. Frustratingly, there were 19 seconds.

However, it was very much a case of quality over quantity when considering those July winners. At Newmarket's July Festival, **Killybegs Warrior** and **Dutch Decoy** both

recorded valuable handicap wins, while a few days later the juvenile filly **Carolina Reaper** proved too hot to handle in a fillies' maiden there. Taking top billing however was **Sacred Angel**, who, after winning a fillies' maiden at the July Festival, went on to claim victory in Ascot's Princess Margaret Stakes, a Group 3, thereby providing Charlie with his first Group winner as solo licence holder.

Once again, James Willoughby produced a fascinating piece in his Klarion column, this time into the correlation between the speed of the racing surface and the rate at which Johnston Racing's

horses win.

That Ascot win for Sacred Angel took Johnston Racing on to the 99-winner mark for the year, from 680 runners. The prize-money total grew to £1,683,247.

## August

The 184 domestic runners produced 22 winners. Arguably, the most significant success came at Thirsk on August 5, for when **Edge of Darkness** splashed to success in the mile and a half handicap at the north Yorkshire course, his win completed a century of domestic wins for



Dr Jim Walker's Finn's Charm, a winner at Musselburgh

Charlie.

This achievement, taken together with Johnston Racing's previous record of success, means that the yard has had at least 100 wins in every one of the last 30 years. It's a unique, remarkable achievement. Ensuring that that chain of success was not broken had been one of Charlie's prime aims for 2023.

You'll notice the word 'splashed' in an earlier paragraph. The rain which turned Thirsk's track soft was mirrored at 'Glorious' Goodwood. Always a meeting which the yard targets with its best horses, their task was made more difficult by the prevailing, extremely soggy underfoot conditions. Those handicap heroes, **The Gatekeeper** and **Dutch Decoy**, came

closest to extending the yard's proud record there (they came second and third in the Golden Mile), but winners proved elusive.

It was also very soft at Deauville when **Sacred Angel** contested the Group 1 Prix Morny. Despite that, she ran well to finish fourth behind the subsequent Middle Park Stakes winner, Vandeck.

**The Gatekeeper** was rewarded for his gallant effort at Goodwood when landing another decent handicap there at the end of the month, and the ground was still soft then!

On August 30, the yard racked up an across-the-card four-timer, the first leg of which was a victory for **Carolina Reaper** in a Group 3 event at Baden-Baden in Germany, the first winner abroad of the Charlie Johnston era.

Following up a story highlighted by Mark about the NatWest bank apparently being unwilling to make loans to racehorse trainers, the Klarion investigated the matter and finally extracted an apology for how the bank had left trainers concerned and confused. We also reported on **Midnight Lion** topping the inaugural Tattersalls Summer Sale, having been sold for 85,000gns in the

wake of an impressive win in a Goodwood maiden. By the end of August there had been 121 British wins from 864 runners, and domestic prize-money earned had risen through the £2m barrier to £2,029,056.

## September

A successful September campaign saw 25 wins from 184 runners, with two four-timers, on September 16 and 30. Perhaps the pick of the winners were the valuable nursery/handicap successes of **Politico** at

Continues on page 20



(from p.19

Carolina Reaper, far side, winner of a Group 3 in Germany

York, **Madame Ambassador** at Newmarket and **Capital Theory** at Ayr.

The run of the month, though, was provided by **Sacred Angel**. In a useful field assembled for the Group 1 Cheveley Park Stakes, the grey filly finished a highly commendable third behind Porta Fortuna, beaten less than two lengths. This performance augurs well for her three-year-old career in 2024.

On the 10th of the month Yorkkindness, owned by Paul York, notched up her fourth win of the year. And just a week later she won again, at Musselburgh, to seal her position as the yard's horse with the most wins in 2023.

Writing in his 'Straight Talking' column in the Klarion, Mark Johnston highlighted the issue of the shocking abuse received by jockeys and trainers and welcomed the actions taken by the BHA against one of those responsible.

At the end of the ninth month of the year, Johnston Racing stood on 147 winners, of which one was achieved abroad.

Total British runners to date stood at 1,019, and prize-money hit £2,349,170.

## October

The 17 wins represented another above-average October campaign for the stable, even though the number of runners fell to 112 as the turf campaign drew to a close.

**Madame Ambassador** followed up her September win at Newmarket with an even better run at the same track to land a valuable fillies' handicap, but the handicap performance of the month was undoubtedly **The Gatekeeper's** lucrative success in the Balmoral Handicap at Ascot on British Champions Day. The win saw the Excelebration gelding's rating rise to 100.



Five wins in the year made Yorkkindness the yard's most prolific winner of 2023



Sacred Angel, winner of the Group 3 Princess Margaret Stakes at Ascot

A promising juvenile winner towards the end of the month was **Bengurion**, successful on debut in a Lingfield novice event.

This month's Klarion was focused on jockeys. James Willoughby turned his statistical eye on Jack Mitchell's impressive record on the stable's horses, while we also congratulated Joe Fanning on his Ayr Gold Cup win on Significantly, winner number 2,810 of his career.

At month-end the yearly tally of wins stood at 164 from 1,131 runners, and total prize-money was £2,630,283.

## November

Five winners from 77 runners. Three of them were juveniles, with **Royal Tapestry** a deserved winner at Lingfield following an unlucky second on that course a week earlier. At the end of the month, the yard was closing in on the 2022 total of 176 British wins.

In the Klarion, Mark took aim at the BHA's regulatory role, looking in particular at the BHA pre-race 'trot-up' regulations, which he described as 'a disaster'. James Willoughby looked forensically at The Gatekeeper's performance in landing the Balmoral Handicap, concluding that Charlie Johnston 'produced a training performance out of the top drawer' in preparing the

horse for this success.

The vital statistics at the end of November were: Wins 169 (one abroad); Runners 1,208; Prize-money £2,716,912.

## December

As the 2023 campaign drew to a close, Johnston Racing notched up a further four wins, from a total of 53 December runners.

With the sport continuing to move at a glacial pace towards taking some measures to deal with the prize-money crisis, the Klarion was delighted to stimulate debate on what action needs to be taken by the sport by publishing the forthright views of John Brown, former CEO of William Hill and Geoff Greetham, former publishing editor of Timeform.

December's winners included three juvenile successes, including a third win for Never Fear, and a debut success for Zandita, the filly also taking the honour of being our last winner of 2023.

At the end of the year, our tally of winners stood at 175, all but one of which were domestic wins. In all, we sent out 1,261 British runners across the year, and they earned a total of £2,779,413.70.

\*\*\*\*\*

Throughout the year, Charlie has had to

face a number of challenges. While the retirement of Subjectivist was always a possibility, it still represented a huge blow that a champion stayer was unable to keep racing at the top level. In an interview before the Qatar Goodwood Festival, he explained his frustration at a number of issues.

'Everytime you have a good winner these days,' he pointed out, 'someone will be straight on the phone trying to buy it. More than 50% of the time it is to go abroad, and if you're lucky they might leave the horse with you until the end of the season.'

Furthermore, he had to endure the loss of other top prospects. 'Dubai Mile has been sold,' he lamented, 'and Subjectivist retired. We also lost Dance In The Grass, who was injured ahead of the Oaks after she ran a nice race in the 1,000 Guineas. They were the three highest-rated horses we had at the start of the year and we're now without all of them.'

**It's a measure of the man that Charlie recovered from these blows to end his first season by being Britain's top trainer of 2023 by the number of races won: by having two Group race successes among his juveniles; and having a number of promising horses with whom to go to war in this coming year.**