



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

Glorified bumper horses? I think not

WHEN IT comes to journalism, if you can call the writing I now do for the Kingsley Klarion 'journalism', I'm a last-minute man. In the days when I wrote for the Sporting Life and then the Racing Post I spent long periods looking at a blank screen and then worked late into the night after I eventually found a topic that sparked my interest and helped to make the words flow. I used to rake through past copies of those publications looking for inspiration but now, with only one daily racing paper and it being dominated by tipping rather than news and comment, I find myself reliant on our own contributors, principally John Scanlon and James Willoughby, to draw my attention to current issues and topics of interest.

John has excelled himself this month and his piece on the Zetland Stakes (p. 35), together with a comment that Charlie made when we were looking ahead at options for Five Stars and an abominable labelling of champion stayers as 'glorified bumper horses' by Richard Forristal in the Racing Post, set me to thinking about why I so enjoy staying races, why I think they are important for the breed, and the rights and wrongs of the BHA's attempts at promoting stayers.

As John says, I had a bit of a love affair with the Zetland Stakes in the 1990s when we won it with Double Eclipse, Double Trigger and Trigger Happy (all by Ela Mana Mou). In those days it was a Listed race and it often threw up a very good horse which went on to be a top-class stayer. But it is fair to say that it often had a fairly small field – few two-year-olds have the stamina and class to compete at that level and, as I will go on to point out, contrary to Richard Forristal's thinking, having stamina alone and lacking speed is not enough – and the placed horses sometimes trailed in the wake of the winner and were consequently rated considerably inferior.

THE Zetland Stakes fell foul of the Pattern Committee's policy of judging a race's suitability for Pattern status on the average, end-of-season rating of the first four home. The third and fourth in the Zetland Stakes were commonly rated well behind the winner and the Zetland was demoted to a Conditions race in 2007. This change drove the race into the doldrums, along with a multitude of other races having that designation, and the quality of runners fell into what could have been terminal decline.

Thankfully, as part of their initiative to promote staying

racing, the Pattern Committee saw the error of their ways, reinstated the race to Listed level in 2015, and further upgraded it to Group 3 in 2019. It is a really good and important race again now and it is this upgrading that led Charlie to exclaim, when I was suggesting it as a possible first step into Pattern company for Markus Graff's filly Five Stars: 'The Zetland Stakes could be really tough, it is effectively the first Derby trial now'.

I AGREE with Charlie and I think this elevation of the Zetland Stakes and the consequential increased quality of the runners demonstrates quite clearly that, if you want to promote staying racing and breeding for stamina, all you need to do is to put on better races for more prize-money over distances that test stamina. Other BHA initiatives to promote stayers, such as running races under what I call 'Chesham rules' – for horses whose sire or dam won over 10 furlongs or more as in Royal Ascot's Chesham Stakes – does nothing for stayers when those races are run over distances short of a mile and is mostly counter-productive. When I was lucky enough to be training a number of horses by those late, great sires Shamardal and Cape Cross, it used to infuriate me that the progeny of Shamardal were eligible for these races and those by Cape Cross were not. Cape Cross was much more of an influence for stamina than Shamardal. It is surely quite simple: if you want to select for stamina you run races that require stamina. Running races over seven furlongs tests for, and ultimately selects for, enough stamina to run seven furlongs, regardless of what that horse's parents have done. Arguably, if you wanted to promote the use of sires and dams which are truly an influence for stamina you would have to restrict the races to those whose offspring had won over a particular distance. It is much simpler to run staying races and leave them open to all.

AND now to Richard Forristal's view. I have often lauded him as the best of Racing Post journalists and I generally respect his views but this recent



Double Trigger won the Zetland Stakes in 1993

article, in which he dared to call no less than Stradivarius and Subjectivist 'glorified bumper horses', was utter nonsense. He suggests they are slow and that is, quite simply, wrong. He cannot be watching the right races or paying sufficient attention as we often now get to see what speed the leaders are doing in races and it is patently obvious that there is nothing slow about Group 1 Flat races even when run over two miles and beyond.

JAMES Willoughby once told me that Double Trigger, in one of his three Goodwood Cup victories, ran the fastest final furlong of the *meeting*. Yes, I said 'meeting'. Faster than those that had rattled down the hill for the five furlongs of the Group 2 King George and those older, hardened, sprint handicappers in the cavalry charge that is the Stewards Cup. It sounds ridiculous and impossible but, when he told me, I didn't have to consider it for too long to realise that it would be true and that it made sense. Horses, whether running five furlongs or two miles, don't maintain maximum effort 'off the bridle' for too long and the sprinters are, generally, slowing down more than the Cup horses at the finish. So, when Forristal says that 'Battaash's 'blistering five-furlong bursts' helped elevate the 2020

Lodging an objection

IN OFF The Bridle (p.27) John Scanlon comments on the Racing Post analysis of the Royal Lodge Stakes and highlights the comments that 'There's no doubting the runner-up (Coroebus) was the best horse in the race' and 'The winner has the right attitude but was gifted this.' James Willoughby also gives us his assessment of the race (p.8).

I thought the Racing Post comments were unusually subjective and I was disappointed that nobody put their name to them. I have to admit that, even inside the final furlong, I thought we were going to come second but it is surely strange to suggest that Royal Patronage was gifted the race or that Coroebus, or his jockey, did anything to scupper their chances. Nothing interfered with him, he did not veer off a straight line, and I didn't see any dramatic signs of him idling in front.

For me, based on the gap between Coroebus and those finishing fourth (the favourite Masekela) to seventh, Coroebus ran out pretty well all the way to the line. That gap narrowed very slightly in the last 50 yards but, throughout the last furlong and a half, it was only Royal Patronage and the eventual third, Unconquerable, that made significant ground relative to Coroebus and the other four runners. No horse appeared to be unlucky and only the winner had to switch out to make a run.

However you analyse it, it was a fantastic race to watch and I think a rematch could be thrilling. Connections of Coroebus have every right to expect that their horse can make further improvement after only two runs, but we might expect more from Royal Patronage given a stiffer test.

season for him but that Cup races are like 'cycling races for bikes with flat tyres', he either has no conception of speed and distance or he is standing somewhere near the start.

Strangely, he says that he can appreciate a St Leger and that it has 'the potential to present the cream of the middle-distance three-year-old crop with a final demanding examination of their steel and stamina'. I wonder if, in using the word 'final', he is suggesting that these horses should be retired at the end of their three-year-old season. For me, as a fan and appreciator of Cup races, the St. Leger is just the beginning: the first (and sometimes best) Ascot Gold Cup trial. Just as, for Charlie, the Zetland Stakes is becoming the first Derby trial. ■