



Mark Johnston's

‘UNPRECEDENTED TIMES’. Like me, you are probably sick of hearing that. I just want to get back to the old normal, not some new-fangled sort of ‘normal’: just normal. But there is no denying that things will be different for a long time to come and the aftermath might well be much worse for some than the pandemic itself.

So far, the racing industry has got off pretty lightly. Of course, there are those who have suffered, and at least one owner who paid the ultimate price, but the predictions of mass bankruptcies and horses abandoned have not materialised, yet. As in other industries and walks of life, government schemes helped those who found their income obliterated overnight and, specifically in racing, there has been aid from the Racing Foundation, the Levy Board, racing charities and others for those in immediate need. But, for most of us in the horse racing industry, it has been the owners who have continued to foot the bill and keep us afloat. Nothing new in that.

At Johnston Racing we cannot claim to have suffered. Yes, income is down a bit from the reduction in racing and the loss of prize-money but our percentage of prize-money is a very small part of our turnover at the best of times and there is no profit in taking horses to the races. Three staff were furloughed in the office for a short time but, for the rest, there has been very little change. Pool money – the

Desperately seeking normality

staff's percentage of prize-money – will be down quite significantly but the biggest Johnston Racing bonus paid to staff, their winners' bonus, is based on winners last year and, for those who were here last year, that will be unchanged. Going forward, although we are now racking up the winners, the bonuses paid next year will surely not reach the usual heights but these things are the cream on the cake. There is still cake. Nobody is down to their last crust.

Straight Talking

This is all thanks to the owners who have kept their horses in training. The nine horses that left when racing was suspended were quickly replaced. We were full throughout the suspension of racing and we are not far off full now but we cannot take this level of support for granted. It is the aftermath that concerns me most. What will the situation be next year?

At this time last year we were only a couple of weeks away from the first yearling sale. I probably didn't have any orders at that stage but, while that has been a constant

frustration over the years and has placed a limit on the maximum amount we would spend on an individual horse, it has never stopped me buying and last year Charlie and I bought more than 60 yearlings on 'spec'. There is no possibility of us being in a position to do the same this year. We simply couldn't take that kind of risk without some measure of the demand for yearlings.

The yearling sales have been pushed back and they now start with the Goffs UK (I still prefer to call it Doncaster to

avoid confusion) Premier Yearling sale on September 1, but they come thick and fast after that. Charlie and I will attend 26 days of yearling sales, plus many days of viewing beforehand, in an eight-week period and we shall view thousands of yearlings. Prices will, as always, be driven by demand and there is currently a huge amount of uncertainty

about that, but we are unlikely to be able to take advantage of any weakness in the market.

I shall probably revert to my old policy of buying until I have a fixed number of

yearlings 'on the shelf' but that policy greatly curtails the overall number purchased and, consequently, the choice available to our owners who have now got used to being able to sit back and choose off our list at their leisure. I will, therefore, be contacting all our owners who usually buy yearlings through us to ask that, in these 'unprecedented times', they try to give me some idea of their requirements in advance so that I can ensure that we have enough yearlings to meet the demand and not too many more.

It is the aftermath that concerns me most. What will the situation be next year?

I MUST be mellowing in my old age. I came home from Pontefract on July 23 and drafted a piece for my 'Bletherings' on our website about the pitiful fare, in terms of prize-money and refreshments, on offer at the track but, for some reason, decided against pressing the 'publish' button. Dark Vision had won the Listed feature race that day and a win like that would usually put me in a good mood with the world.

But four hours at Pontefract without so much as a drink of water on offer fairly focuses the mind on the paltry prize-money that we were competing for, and on managing director Norman Gundill's comments after their previous meeting when he said: 'So far as owners are concerned, do they want racing and some prize-money or don't they want racing? It's as simple as that.'

At the same time Norman pointed out that 'the costs of running the show are not insignificant and haven't changed.' How right he is, but he seems to be taking for granted those who are faced with the biggest cost of all. Sixty horses competed at Pontefract that day and a very conservative estimate of the cost of getting them there - based on an average of six runs per horse per year (excluding all those horses that, for one reason or another, don't make it to the track in any given year) and average

Owners deserve better

training and running costs of £30,000 per annum (excluding losses on capital expenditure) would be £300,000.

Dark Vision won the biggest prize of the day, £14,461 for the Listed feature race, and it was a lot better to win than to be beaten, but I couldn't help but look around me and wonder how sustainable meetings like this can be. I can only hope that the handful of owners in attendance, corralled beyond the winning post, were better catered for than me but at some point they might start to wonder what they are getting out of this. As far as I can see, they are currently far better off watching their horses from home and, in that case, they could be running anywhere in the world.

I haven't had the opportunity to discuss the matter with Norman Gundill – I would have done but I didn't see him venture outside of the building at that meeting and we trainers, of course, were not allowed in – but I am appalled to

think that what he said, if it was correctly reported in the media, is a true reflection of his attitude towards the owners whose generosity and commitment to British racing gives him the product which he sells on to the public with a very substantial mark-up indeed.

OWNERS do not buy and maintain racehorses in order to get a free lunch. Even the excellent catering provided by the likes of Ascot, Ayr, Chester and York, under normal circumstances, isn't worth what it costs the owner on the day, never mind for the rest of the year. But, at least, it shows appreciation for their irreplaceable contribution to the sport. At present, when owners' minds must undoubtedly be focussed on what they are putting into racing and what they are getting back, it has never been more important for all of us who depend on them

to do everything we can to show our appreciation.

I haven't had the opportunity to see how well the various tracks have risen to the challenge of welcoming owners under the current restrictions, and making them feel that their visit to the races has been worthwhile. I am quite strictly segregated from the owners on track and, frankly, very few of my owners have been persuaded to attend. But I do see what has been done for trainers and stable staff and there is a very wide variation which indicates that some appreciate our presence more than others. Ascot and York were top of the tree with Goodwood close behind. Pontefract and Redcar (and a few others – sadly, mostly in Yorkshire) might say that is because they can afford it, but I'd say it is all about attitude and effort. It isn't coincidence that you see the best attitude and the most effort in the most successful businesses.



Norman Gundill