WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH . . .

. . . the tough, as we know, get going. With racing facing numerous problems on top of the Covid crisis, JOHN SCANLON looks at the year ahead for Johnston Racing.

As I understand it, we have Joseph P Kennedy, the father of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States of America, to thank for the aphorism above, rather than the singer, Billy Ocean, or the soundtrack to the movie ‘The Jewel of the Nile’. Each year around this time, the Klarion looks forward to what might lie ahead for the stable, its owners and its horses, in the racing year to come. Given all that we have witnessed in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the worldwide efforts to contain it, including the suspension of racing and the protracted period of having to race behind closed doors, it’s hard to deny that racing faces an existential crisis in the months ahead. Owners have been hit hard by the global economic effects of the crisis, and in Britain in particular, the already grim prize-money payable to our owners has been hit hard by reductions forced on racecourses by the lack of income associated with welcoming crowds to the races, and by falling betting turnover. Consequently, even within the higher echelons of the sport, owners and breeders are cutting back on numbers.

Rest assured, the going has already become tough in the extreme. So what can we expect from Johnston Racing in times like these? Well, if you look back at the history of the stable, there is reason to believe that Mark and his team can be classed among the ‘tough’. The going was undeniably tough in the late 1980s when Mark and Deirdre acquired the dilapidated Bank End Stables in North Somercotes in Lincolnshire, where their horses had to be galloped on a beach bounded by an active RAF bombing range.

By dint of sheer hard work, determination to succeed and no little skill, they trained their first winners and readied themselves for a move to Middleham. Having moved to Kingsley House, the going was similarly tough when they faced the Herculean task of upgrading the facilities there. History shows that they not only completed that task admirably, but added Warwick House and Kingsley Park to their estate, transforming the latter into one of Europe’s most prestigious and well-equipped training facilities, while simultaneously assembling a streak of 27 consecutive centuries of winners.

And when faced with huge changes in the profile of the string in 2015, which saw many more juveniles replace three-year-olds in particular within the team, threatening a substantial drop in winning opportunities, the yard took the bull by the horns and made a big impression in the first juvenile races of the year, landing the first three in a row to demonstrate that the Johnston ‘show’ remained firmly on the road.

The yard has already experienced the effect of the current turndown in the industry; prize-money is hugely reduced, owners are cutting back. And as Mark has admitted to the press, the going at Kingsley Park at the moment is down. Yet how has Johnston Racing reacted to this new patch of the toughest of going?

As one would expect, the yard has reacted by reminding us all why Mark Johnston is the winning-most trainer in British racing history, turning out 21 winners during January to record its highest total of winners for the first month of the year. A start like this lets us look forward to the year with increasing confidence, and there is much to savour in prospect.

At the highest level, the Group 1 winner Gear Up remains a hugely exciting racehorse. Teme Valley 2’s Teofilo colt has to be regarded as a Classic prospect and, all being well, he will begin his three-year-old season by attempting to become Johnston Racing’s third winner of the Dante Stakes in five years, following in the hoofprints of Permian and Thunderous.

Highclere Thoroughbreds’ Night of Thunder colt, Thunderous, remains in training. He has always been held in high regard and could well be campaigned at the top level this term.

Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed’s Teofilo filly, Dubai Fountain, is another to whom we can look forward. Second in the May Hill Stakes and fourth in the Group 1 Fillies’ Mile on her last two starts, she holds an entry in the Irish Oaks.

Thanks largely to the exploits of Dr Jim Walker’s Subjectivist last autumn, followers of the yard are looking forward to the year’s great staying races with particular relish. The Group 1 winner joins Nayef Road and Sir Ron Priestley in a formidable team to contest the Cup races and, hopefully, some prime foreign targets.

As ever, Mark and Charlie are delighted with the juvenile team which they have assembled and work continues at Kingsley Park to ready the youngsters for their initial steps towards the racecourse. An exciting addition to the team is Mrs Susan Hearn’s Ulysses filly out of Reckoning, the Danehill Dancer mare who has produced Sir Ron Priestley, Subjectivist and Alba Rose in successive years!

OPES are also high that some of our three-year-olds will take a step forward, particularly those who, on breeding, are likely to improve for time and distance.

Of one thing we can be sure. In the face of the challenges facing our sport at this most difficult of times, Johnston Racing will be in the forefront of those seeking to prove that ‘when the going gets tough, the tough get going.’