



Mark Johnston's

BACK IN February of last year I wrote about BHA plans to change the regulations on apprentice jockey agreements and, in particular, the percentage of riding fees and prize-money payable to the trainers.

I was, to say the least, angered by statements made by the BHA, the PJA and in the Racing Post which I, and others, felt portrayed trainers as money-grabbing abusers of vulnerable employees. At the time I set out some detail on the costs associated with training an apprentice jockey and, in particular, the cost of providing suitable mounts for a rider who, in the beginning, is unlikely to be giving them their best chance of winning.

The changes, which were due for introduction on March 28, were postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic but were introduced, despite fierce opposition from trainers, later in the year. As a result, Andrew Balding and Richard Fahey, two of the most successful producers of young



Olli Stammers

difficult for me to get any new jockey started.

So, when I was approached last spring by Ed and Tanya Peate to ask if we would take on their son Jonny, I tried to make it very clear that it would not be straightforward. I had never met the Peates but I knew that Ed ran a very successful pre-training yard near Newmarket and we had received a number of horses from them in the past. Some of our biggest owners are customers of Ed.

Jonny has grown up with racehorses and I was told he had been riding out for trainers in Newmarket and elsewhere at every opportunity during school holidays. He

APPRENTICE REGULATIONS NEED RETHINK

had been with some of the best trainers in the country so, I have to admit, it was flattering to hear that he wanted to come here. He came for the Easter holidays but had to return after a week when the lockdown was introduced. He had, however, managed to impress us in just a few days and we had clearly satisfied him as he joined us full-time in May.

JONNY has had opportunities growing up that most aspiring jockeys could not dream of but his dedication and work ethic is faultless – he rides out on every day off and spends a good deal of his free time in fitness and technique training. He emerged from the BHA apprentice training course at the British Racing School with flying colours and he was granted his licence at the beginning of December.

Then came the difficult bit, finding him a ride. No matter how good we think a young rider might be, it is impossible to say that he or she is going to give their first few mounts the best chance of winning. That is why we have generally aimed to start apprentices on horses that we own ourselves. As I said in February, Keith Dalglish is the only apprentice I can remember who I felt had the experience – he had ridden ‘flapping’ races in his



Andrew Breslin

Straight Talking

hometown of Hawick – and ability to give me the confidence to recommend him to an owner for his first ride.

Now, without suitable horses in our ownership, despite Jonny’s connections and experience, I was unable to find an owner of a suitable horse who was willing to give him his first race-riding opportunity. Charlie then suggested that Coupe de Champagne would be a suitable mount, that there was an apprentice race at Wolverhampton for which she was qualified, and that, as she belonged to the Kingsley Park 17 partnership, I could choose the jockey.

I found it a very difficult decision to make. In choosing a jockey for their horse, I am required to act in the best interests of the partnership. With established apprentices Andrew Breslin and Olli Stammers on our team and eligible to ride in the race, how could I say that Jonny would give the filly a better, or even an equal, chance?



Jonny Peate

for the point of the bend where, if he was at the front, he could get to the rail. ‘We know she has early speed’, I said, ‘so, hopefully, you’ll only have one, at the most, on your inner’. I told him not to be waiting for the pack if he was in front turning for home and to start ‘winding her up’ early. ‘The objective is to win’, I said, ‘you’re not just going for a ride round’.

Jock Bennett drove him to Wolverhampton, walked the track with him, went over the plan again, and pointed out how Hollie Doyle had bagged the lead and the rail in an earlier race. Jock would often be the one to go to the races with an apprentice first time, if I am not going to be there myself, and, like many of our new apprentices, Jonny is too young to drive, so we’ll have to be getting him to the races

“Two of the most successful producers of young jockeys in recent years said they would not be signing up any new apprentices”

for some time to come. How ironic that the BHA and PJA’s main complaint against trainers was that they weren’t paying their share of apprentices’ travel expenses.

I really felt that I was putting my head on the block by using a Kingsley Park partnership horse to give Jonny his first ride and, when the filly missed the break and trailed the field down the back straight, I thought it was about to be chopped off. To give him his due Jonny did not panic. When all our best laid plans went out the window in the first few strides, he headed for the

rail and the shortest way around rather than pointlessly try to drive his mount around the field. He was slightly detached at half-way but sitting still and steadily working his way back into things. He was still last when he went out of the tv picture with four furlongs to go but he had passed two when he re-emerged a furlong later and he was clearly looking to weave his way through the field. It wasn’t a clear passage but, again, he kept the head, switched for a gap, and wore down the leader in the final furlong.

IT was a dream start for Jonny and I have been saved the difficulty of justifying my choice of jockey to the owners of Coupe de Champagne. They, I am sure, will get a great deal of pleasure from knowing what an important part they have played in getting him started. He remembered to thank them in his post-race interview and, however far he goes in his career as a jockey, I am sure he will remember the Kingsley Park 17 partnership and Coupe de Champagne.

But, sadly, it will not be plain sailing from here. It will still be difficult for me, despite the size of our team, to provide a reasonable number of good rides for Jonny without a horse or horses kept for the job. The BHA have done a horrendous disservice to young aspiring jockeys, particularly those who do not have a background or connections in racing. They have removed all chance of a return for those who were willing and able to provide horses for them to ride, alienated the best trainers of apprentices in the country, and left young people at the mercy of those who might make promises they can’t keep or, worse still, gives rides on unsuitable horses in order to attract staff.

It is already a crisis. Something needs to be done as a matter of urgency to ensure that the opportunity to become jockeys is given to the right people, by the right people, so that we can continue to produce world-class jockeys in Britain. ■