



Mark Johnston's

I PROMISED you way back in May, and reiterated in September, that I would keep you up to date with the entries for the new £500,000 Cesarewitch, which I predicted would be largely funded by owners. At the risk of boring you, I'm going to do just that.

In May, hot on the heels of York announcing plans for a £1million Ebor, Jockey Club Racecourses came out with their plan for a £1m Cesarewitch with an immediate jump in 2018 from £250,000 to £500,000.

They confessed at the time that they would be increasing entry fees to 1.25% of the total prize-money (0.5% at York) but the trick is in structuring the fees with an early closing date to claw in large sums of money from horses that don't run.

They told us nothing about these plans and we had to watch out for the sting.

The early closing date duly came on August 21 and 95 horses entered at a cost of £1,000. On September 18 there was the first opportunity to drop out, but 66 stood their ground at £2,000 each. On October 2 there was another round of daylight robbery and 57 paid another £2,000. Six days later came the choice to confirm and 52 paid another £1,250.

Sting in tail on funding of big pot

At that point, Jockey Club Racecourses had taken £406,000 in entry fees from owners, 81.2% of the total prize-money fund for the race, but, at the 48-hour declaration stage, lady luck or the savvier owners and trainers decided enough was enough. Thirteen horses were eliminated from the race – many, including a couple I train, declared with the express intention of getting entry fees back – and £81,250 had to be returned to their owners.

Straight Talking

Nonetheless, the racecourse clawed in a total of £324,750 in entry fees, 65% of the total value of the race from owners.

Next year, I believe, the total prize fund rises to £750,000 en route to the £1m in 2020. The total entry fee for each runner, at 1.25%, increases in line with the prize-money but we must watch to see if the entry dates and payment structure changes. I wonder if Jockey Club Racecourses could be embarrassed into reducing the entry fee or even reverting to the old prize-money and conditions which, let's face it, attracted an almost identical size and class of field. But, on the other hand, I wouldn't put it past them to try to increase their haul. Maybe they were aiming for even more than 65% from owners to add to all that they are receiving for the race from sponsors and media rights, before a customer walks through the gate.



Mark enjoys his first Cesarewitch winner Spirit Of Love with jockey Olivier Peslier and owner, the late Arthur Robinson

Transparency, or fake news?

DON'T believe all you read. That is good advice but, if truth be told, most of us are guilty of placing too much faith in the written word. We develop our own level of cynicism and choose our reading material accordingly but still we get it wrong. Some put faith in The Times, others buy papers which tell of meetings with aliens and sightings of Elvis – each to his own.

The internet has forced us to become more wary than ever and I'd like to think that there aren't too many people who will now start planning their retirement on the back of an offer of \$10 million from a stranger in East Africa who is struggling to get his windfall out of the

country. But, as we saw, particularly, during the Trump-Clinton presidential race, some fake news can be very convincing and, depending on the source, we are all at risk of being misled.

Horseracing is not immune from this trend and tipsters and pundits are using the various media platforms to reinforce and, subsequently, add value to their opinions. I'd love to think that people aren't taken in but, then again, if some weren't lured into parting with their cash, would the scammers and carpetbaggers bother doing it?

In this sphere, too, we tend to judge the credibility of material by its source.

If some moron, who can't spell or complete a sentence without words beginning in 'f' and 'c', tells us that a certain jockey can't ride or that he has deliberately 'stopped' his horse, we ignore it and block the perpetrator from bombarding us with his views. But, when the news, or information is on the BHA Twitter feed, what then? Is it fact, professional opinion, just plain old opinion, or fake news? Is it intended to be helpful or just interesting? To whom?

When they tell us, as they often do, that a jockey has reported that his horse 'ran green' or 'hung left', I think we can be reasonably sure, just reasonably, that

that is an accurate report of what was said, but have we got any idea if that is a true reflection of what happened? Does

anyone try to corroborate the statement before it is published?

When we are told, as we commonly are, that the veterinary officer reported that a certain horse lost a shoe, I think that is pretty much certain to be fact. But why are they telling us? I believe that there is a strong inference that this fact is likely to have had a significant bearing on the performance of that horse when, in reality, many, if not most, shoes are lost after the finish line. The factual information has been distributed but nothing is done to prevent it from being misleading.

When we read that the same BHA veterinary officer reported a horse to be lame on its left hind leg post-race, that is also taken by many people to be fact but it is only that veterinary officer's opinion and, even if it is correct, there is not enough information for it to be meaningful.

And, of course, as the selection of horses to be seen by veterinary officers and jockeys to be interviewed is not random, the information is even more misleading. When they tell us that the

beaten favourite finished lame, bled from the nose or suffered interference, this is taken to be a reason for the defeat; but nobody tells us whether the horse or horses, which finished in front of this beaten favourite, also finished lame, bled from the nose, or suffered interference. That will probably seem like a ridiculous suggestion, at least to those of you who don't work with racehorses, but I can assure you that many of the things which are reported as a reason for defeat are as common in the winner's enclosure as they are among the also-rans.

Informed

It may even be a surprise to some of you to hear that veterinary opinions on lamenesses, injuries, and other ailments are reported on social media at all. It was to me. But, if that surprises you, it might shock you to hear that such reports go out on social media before the trainer or owner are informed and, certainly in the fairly recent past, it was not unheard of for these reports to go out

without any mention of the findings being passed to connections of the horse.

In general, we would not report low degrees of lameness immediately post-race to owners if we do not consider them to be relevant. Horses, like all athletes, can be stiff or sore after competition without having suffered any significant damage. Our staff check and trot up the horses before leaving the track, and do so again on returning home. The yard managers check their runners the next morning, and one of the vets has a look if there are any issues or doubts. If all is well at that stage, we report to the owner that the horse is 'fine post-race'. We now realise, however, that, even when we think all is hunky dory and we're looking forward to the next race, the veterinary officer's opinion may differ and a report may have been sent to tens of thousands of Twitter followers saying that our horse was lame.

The BHA say they do this as part of their policy of transparency and you may feel that it is justified. I don't. I'm not at all comfortable with it.

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