



# Mark Johnston's

# Straight Talking

## Owners must be given access

**T**HIS time last month we were looking forward to the resumption of racing and now, with a month of racing behind closed doors under our belts, we are looking forward to welcoming some owners to watch, first-hand, their horses competing.

It is vitally important to give owners access to tracks and not just because there is no good reason not to. The owners have kept the industry afloat during the suspension of racing as the vast majority have been willing to keep their horses in training even when there was no prospect of seeing them race. Now that they are racing and all other sectors of the industry are benefitting financially from their participation it is unthinkable that owners should be denied the opportunity to attend if they want to.

### Television

I only hope that they aren't too disappointed. Racing behind closed doors, as you will have seen, makes very good television. It is arguably just as good on TV as racing with a crowd and it has been gratifying to have it confirmed that TV viewers watch racing, principally, for the horses and the race and not for the ancillary drivel that we have to endure.

Unfortunately, on course, racing behind closed doors is a very different animal to the real thing. Royal Ascot was by far the best of it as, despite some inclement weather, it was very comfortable. They opened their huge stand for the handful of people present, provided packed lunches with a touch of Ascot decadence, had big screens on the course, and all the usual small screens showing racing from near and far indoors.

**I**'M not going to single out the worst experiences, as I said last month that I would welcome the resumption of racing in whatever shape it came and I would make every effort not to complain, but I can tell you that five hours sitting outside at a picnic table on a dreich day isn't much fun. So, I will make every effort to welcome owners at the races but, frankly, I'm not going to be recommending it to them, at least until I've seen how it works in practice.

## Newbury's initiative welcome

**A**S the Kingsley Klarion is, as it says on page three every month, 'The Johnston Racing magazine', I generally expect our principal contributors to share the ethos of Johnston Racing but I wouldn't dream of imposing my views on them or insisting, as is the case with some racing publications (I know from personal experience), that columnists should not contradict each other. Regular readers will have noted that John Scanlon and I often present opposing views and this month is no exception.

I cannot agree with John's condemnation of Newbury's 'pub in the paddock' initiative on Derby Day (Off The Bridle, p. 12). Why, if government guidelines allow for the sale of food and beverages, outside, with social distancing in place, can't Newbury, as a licensee, take advantage of this? As I have said from the outset of this pandemic, what better place than a racecourse to implement social distancing measures and to minimise the risk of viral spread? At least they are showing racing, not a singer or band, although I understand that they plan to show football after racing from Epsom. I am not so keen on that idea. I am a firm believer in racecourses concentrating, at all times, on their core product – horse racing.

I would be very interested to hear if they shall be opening their betting outlets. I have for many years advocated the opening of racecourses for simulcasting of racing from other tracks as is commonly practised in other jurisdictions, such as Hong Kong. Peter Savill advocated this when he was chairman of the BHB and, if I remember rightly, there were some issues surrounding the licensing of racecourses for betting purposes when there are no horses on track. But I am sure there have been events where the Breeders' Cup and other major international race meetings have been screened on British courses with betting available so perhaps it is not an insurmountable problem. I'd love to see events such as Royal



Newbury's pub in the paddock

Ascot or the Grand National at Hamilton Park with all the facilities open, racing on big screens, and an atmosphere approaching the real thing.

It is a continuous frustration to me that no racecourse makes any significant effort to sell 'away' racing. They prefer to fill their screens with adverts for their hospitality packages or weddings. If only they could see the advantage in selling the sport of horse racing to the captive audience they have on track. I am well aware of the financial consequences of abandoned meetings and I have often thought that, if racecourses had put enough effort into an offering of continuous racing action, it might be possible to adequately entertain the customers on those unfortunate occasions when we cannot get horses on the track.

Initiatives like the one at Newbury, albeit for a very small 'crowd' and under exceptional circumstances, give me some hope that my dream could become a reality. What do you think? Do you agree with John or me? Let us know.

and hotel for horses and attendants staying overnight and now 16 other tracks have followed suit.

It is really good news but it is notable that, due to requirements for social distancing and the BHA specification that all accommodation should be single en-suite rooms, some tracks have a limitation on the numbers they can take (Kempton 7; Newbury, despite having a hotel on site, 8; Catterick 8; Epsom 10, Sandown 10; York 21; Doncaster 30; Ayr 39). Maybe, when this is all over, someone, perhaps the Racing Post, will have a look at the archaic racecourse practice of expecting unrelated adults to share rooms.

## DESERT ISLAND DELIGHT

A LIVE audience of 3.1 million people. Do we ever get those sort of figures in horseracing? Maybe we do for the Derby or the Grand National. I don't actually know, but it sounds like a pretty big number and that's the sort of audience that Desert Island Discs commands week in and week out.

It was a huge honour to be asked to do it (I think thanks to owner, Jane Knight, who put my name forward) and tremendous fun. I did a similar thing on Radio York about 20 years ago, thoroughly enjoyed it, and always wanted to do the real thing so I jumped at the chance.

Unfortunately, due to current restrictions, I couldn't travel to the studio so I had to do it on a remote link but that didn't detract from the weeks of anticipation and time spent trying to span my lifetime with just eight tunes.

It got me to thinking that maybe some of our readers

would like to give us their 'desert island discs' and luxury item or maybe, since our focus is horseracing, the eight races you would want to take with you if you were allowed a DVD player on your island. Here are mine:

**Mister Baileys** winning the 2,000 Guineas, 1994.

**Double Trigger** and **Double Eclipse** fighting out the finish of the Goodwood Cup, 1995.

**Fruits of Love** beating **Yavana's Pace** into second in the Hardwicke Stakes, 2000.

**Attraction** winning the Cherry Hinton Stakes, 2003

**Shamardal** winning the Dewhurst, 2004

**The Last Lion** winning the Middle Park Stakes, 2016

**Coastal Bluff** (K Darley – no bridle) dead heats with **Ya Malak** (Alex Greaves – first woman to win a UK G1), Nunthorpe Stakes, 1997.

**Red Rum**, Grand National, 1977.

Feel free to send us yours.

## A note of thanks

I would like to thank everyone most sincerely for all the messages, emails, cards and flowers that have been sent to myself or the family following the death of my mother, Kathleen Ferguson.

They have been much appreciated during this difficult time.

With heartfelt wishes,  
Deirdre