



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

THE SCIENCE OF HANDICAPPING?

LAST MONTH I shared my views on the effect of weight carried on horses and I feared that James Willoughby might pour cold water on my theories or, worse still, attempt to disprove them with figures and cold logic. I was mightily relieved to discover that he agreed with me.

I am, therefore, emboldened by success last month, going to risk going a stage further. I intend to call into question the objectivity of handicapping through the allocation of ratings by individuals and I will challenge the assertion of many proponents of the handicap system that it is based on science. I would say that, apart from a bit of basic arithmetic applied according to those ancient rules dreamt up by Admiral Rous and his pals, there is no science in it at all.

I have said most of this before, but I was prompted to revisit the issue by two incidents that happened last month. The first followed Trojan Spirit's victory at Kempton on December 19. We were, of course, pleased with the result, as is invariably the case when you win, and considered it a decent progression from the horse's first two starts.

SOMEONE from Bestbettingsites.com was less impressed. He/she/it 'tweeted': 'Mmm, hard ridden to beat four rivals finishing in a heap? Gets a 77 rating with us'. Now he/she/it probably feels vindicated and very proud of his/her/its 'mathematics' as the official handicapper has rated the horse 79 but where, I ask you, is the science in this?

Basically, both the official handicapper and the person/machine from Bestbettingsites.com have used the same approach. They have assumed that

in any race for inexperienced horses where the majority of the field finish in close proximity to each other (in this case the first four in a six-runner race finished within three lengths of each other), the performances must be average for the grade. A fair assumption, perhaps, and then they pluck a figure out of the air that can be considered average. If one, or more, of the six later puts in a performance – better or worse – that suggests that this assumption was wrong, then they can just say that it has improved or that it has failed to reproduce its previous form. Who can prove otherwise? That isn't a science by any definition I know.

There was one horse in the race that had run more than the others and had



Admiral Rous, appointed public handicapper in 1855

been placed on two of its four starts. It was the only horse in the race with an official handicap rating and it had been allocated a mark of 80. It started favourite and finished fourth so our friends at Bestbettingsites.com and the BHA conveniently ignore that horse's form, and the mark it had previously been given, as to do otherwise would mess with their assumptions on the race.

What's more, the official handicapper, when assessing the race and allocating 79 to Trojan Spirit, drops the horse that finished fourth, beaten three lengths, by 2lb to 78. Clearly, to do otherwise and apply the arithmetical rules of handicapping would expose the whole system for the dog's dinner that it is and would result in chaos. It would also remind us that the handicapper got it very wrong, either in this race or in the previous races in which the favourite ran.

THE other, more important, incident took place on December 22 when, prior to the start of a 10-furlong novice race at Lingfield, Matt Chapman effectively told Sky Sports Racing viewers that our two runners, Muir Wood and Demilion, wouldn't be trying to obtain their best possible position because Charlie and I aren't stupid and we 'know how the system works'. It was an appalling thing for a commentator to be saying on television about the way racing is run and the way that trainers manipulate the system if they are, in his opinion, anything other than stupid. I called on the BHA, through my Bletherings column on our website, to call him to account but I am not aware of any action being taken.

After the two horses finished second and third he revisited the subject on air, expressed his surprise at their finishing



Matt Chapman

positions and stated that maybe Charlie and I just didn't care. The saddest thing of all is that he is not alone in thinking that that is how the system works or in perpetuating the view and passing it on to the public at large. The rot goes all the way to the top of the BHA.

Many will say that the system works

and that horses eventually end up racing against others of similar ability which achieves the holy grail of 'competitive' racing. But a monkey or a machine could design a better system to achieve the same thing.

To summarise, the handicap system is inequitable and commonly results in horses which were lucky enough to enter on a low mark or, dare I say, had their entry rating manipulated, receiving more prize-money than better horses on the route to arriving at a rating which approximately reflects their ability. Furthermore, it leads the public to think that our sport is crooked and that those

who are best at predicting results do so through inside information and an understanding of 'how the system works' rather than through a knowledge of horses and their form. If Matt Chapman is to be believed, that is the case.

Will it change? Probably not in my lifetime. Change would require the turkeys, in the BHA handicapping and integrity departments, to vote for Christmas.

By the way, the two horses, Muir Wood and Demilion, were allocated ratings of 75 and 74 respectively. Average for the grade. Again, no science.

Beginning a new chapter

WHEN NEWS of Charlie taking over our licence to train eventually trickled out – it did just 'trickle' out – I found it quite bizarre. So different from the days when the racecourse press rooms were populated with racing correspondents from all the big daily papers. John Garnsey from the Daily Express would have been on the phone before we'd even finalised our decision. I could never figure out where he got his information. It was quite uncanny and sometimes unsettling. Anyway, when the news eventually trickled out, there were some trying to hail it as my retirement and/or the end of an era.

I don't see it as either. For a start, I haven't retired. I'm still getting up in the dark and I'm still up after midnight finishing off my Kingsley Klarion article or exchanging emails with Ralph Beckett and William Haggas on the state of British

racing. Nothing has changed in that regard. There is still plenty work here for us all.

I see it more as a new chapter in the life of Johnston Racing and there have been many of those. We always like to be changing, moving forward, and refusing to stand still. Not quite re-inventing ourselves but avoiding stagnation at all costs.

Of course, the change from a licence in my name to a joint licence was made only a year ago, and that was a new chapter in itself, but it was a bit like only half-turning the page and trying to look forward and back at the same time. I felt at times, when we had big winners or passed milestones, that Charlie didn't get credit for his achievements and the huge part he has played in recent years.

I could not help but note that, after the death of HH Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid al Maktoum in 2021, when his Shadwell

Estates company announced major cutbacks, it was myself and Sir Michael Stoute, two of his older trainers, who were cut out completely. And this year, under the management of his daughter, Sheika Hissa, they have announced the addition of four 'young' trainers. I have to face the fact that new, younger owners, will want a trainer closer to their own age and, under the joint licence, they may not have seen Charlie in that light.

I HOPE that the owners who were with us under my licence will know that I am still going to be around and that they will be receiving the same service and standard of care as always. In addition, they all know Charlie and know that he has been involved from an early age. And maybe some new owners will see this new chapter as confirmation that we are still a vibrant business at the forefront of positive change in racing. ■