



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

MEDIA RIGHTS . . . AND WRONGS

IT is the time of year for roasting chestnuts and I still have a few old chestnuts that I need to roast. I apologise in advance for sounding like a broken record on these subjects but I am working on the principle that, if I keep banging the drum, something will eventually get done.

I have to welcome the fact that RMG (Racecourse Media Group) has brought the subject of media rights back under the spotlight by objecting to a Twitter post by a syndicate member which included a video taken at Cheltenham. I don't know the details of the case and I can appreciate that the racecourses have contracts with TV channels, and others, in which there are likely to be restrictions on who can

film where and what. But I have seen the reaction in the press and on social media from a significant number of owners and trainers, and the racecourses are treading on stony ground.

The BHB, under Peter Savill, saw media rights as having the potential to provide a sound financial footing for racing and a means of securing a fair price from the bookmakers for our

with the racecourses staking their claim to the media rights and determined to gain sole control to the exclusion of the BHB and horsemen. I couldn't understand it at the time – how could the stadia disregard the players? They have nothing to sell without the horses.

But they won, they got their media rights, and they took over from the betting industry as the ones holding the

purse strings and trickling out just enough to keep the horsemen in the game, and they have enjoyed a relatively lucrative time as a result. But the fact remains that they do not have

a business without horses. Just as the bookmakers tried to alleviate their dependence on horse racing by diversifying into FOBTs and promoting all other forms of betting, the

racecourses have put greater and greater emphasis on food and beverage and other forms of entertainment. Yet the fact remains that their core business and principal earner for most, if not all, is horse racing. Without it, they cease to exist and they should be aware that owners tend to be quite possessive about their horses and get upset when people try to tell them that they don't have the right to photograph or film their own horse, or try to dictate what they can do with that photograph or film once they have it. They might start to wonder who's grinding this organ and who's collecting the money from the cap.

Guardians

In my opinion, it would do no harm to revisit the whole subject of media rights and sponsorship. The racecourses have not proved to be trustworthy guardians of those

media rights. They have, just like the betting industry before them, refused to reveal exactly how much they have in their coffers, they constantly plead poverty, and they now seem to think that any reduction in their income should be passed on in what they pay their suppliers, the horsemen, so that their profits can be maintained. I didn't think business worked like that.

I am continually frustrated by the underuse of the pictures, the rights to which the racecourses hold so dearly, for the promotion of horse racing, especially on track. And yet, it seems that when a syndicate seeks to use images of their own horse for promotion of their business and so, in turn, the sport and industry of horse racing, they find they are breaching a media rights contract which they never really chose to be a party to in the first place. So I hope this small incident is going to open a much bigger can of worms. We'll see.

Restrictions require review

IT isn't such an old chestnut but we really have to nip these sire and dam restricted Novice and Maiden races in the bud and stop wasting money on them. It is highly debatable whether the sire and/or dam restriction, in itself, is doing anything to promote stayers, regardless of the race distance and, when these races are run over an inadequate distance, they are giving opportunities to horses which have no propensity for stamina and, in many cases, thanks to the restrictions, these are uncompetitive races.

Pedigrees

I don't know how we fare in these races in comparison to other trainers, but I would imagine that we do pretty well. We have a large string of juveniles, I tend to favour middle-distance pedigrees, and I'm no stranger to looking for an edge in the conditions. We have been targeting the Chesham, at Royal Ascot, for many years and have long known to look for sires who won over 10 furlongs or more but are an influence for speed.

It is very frustrating to see the relatively large sums on offer for winning these races, which also generally carry 'Plus 10' bonuses and are eligible for Tattersalls Book 1 bonus, going to horses by sires who are clearly not an influence for stamina while the progeny of some proven staying sires (Teofilo and the late Cape Cross are great examples) are not eligible. Opening the races to the progeny of dams who won over a certain trip might increase the competitiveness by simply doubling the pool of eligible horses, but the premise is still flawed and serves no good purpose.

Another broken record of mine is the one that says, 'if you want to promote stayers, put on staying races.' It is as simple as that.

‘They might start to wonder who's grinding this organ’

IF you haven't read Neil Mechie's article on welfare in last month's Klarion, may I suggest that you do. Hopefully, your November issue is still kicking around in your downstairs loo, or somewhere but, if not, you can find it at www.johnston.racing/klarion/if-only-they-could-talk/.

The whole subject of horse welfare and, animal welfare in general, is getting totally out of hand. Politicians of all creeds are jumping on the bandwagon and the media are having a field day.

I have to say that I do feel that our whole industry is threatened. At the root of the threat is ignorance and that ignorance is not just among the public at large, or the vote-hungry politicians, but it often extends to those who consider themselves supporters of horse racing and even, perhaps,

those who are drafting 'the case for the defence'.

But, if we feel threatened, just imagine what it must feel like if your livelihood is derived from stock farming. Not only are they having their welfare standards questioned, and the ethics of meat production called to account, but it is now being suggested that the very existence of their animals is a threat to the planet. It would almost be funny if it wasn't so serious.

It wouldn't, perhaps, be quite so bad if their opponents were tree-dwelling, self-sufficient, naturists but their accusers are, largely, city dwellers who might collect their couscous in a paper bag from the delicatessen but they live a plastic-dominated life with little or no thought for the logistics of shipping chickpeas from South America or the implications of choosing vinyl before leather and rayon rather than wool.

FOCUS ON THE FINISH LINE

WHILE ON the subject of media rights and images, someone really needs to explain to some of those manning the cameras that it is a horse race. It starts at the stalls, or tape, and ends at the winning post. There are people who, for various reasons, have a particular interest in every individual runner. They want to see how that particular horse performs

relative to the rest of the field. They don't need to see close-ups of two horses fighting out the finish and they certainly don't need to see the winner – or the one the cameraman thinks is the winner – pulling up and cantering back.

Stop the camera at the finish line until the last horse has passed. After that you can do what you like.