



Mark Johnston's

STRESSING OVER THE SCANS

A FEW years ago I banned our vets from using the phrase 'stress fracture', particularly when related to stress fractures of the tibia and pelvis, to our owners. It may seem like plain English - no Latin words or medical terms there - but it is a particularly misleading description. Owners are horrified to think that their horse has a fracture caused by stress.

My definition of a stress fracture, when explaining the situation to an owner, is that it is a crack in the bone which is so

fine that we cannot, initially, see it with a conventional imaging technique such as an X-ray. We diagnose the fracture by taking repeated X-rays or ultrasound scans and watching for the formation of a callus: a bony patch laid down over the area to strengthen the bone. Now, that doesn't sound half as dramatic or concerning, does it? And, in many cases it isn't dramatic or

concerning. It is at times, arguably, a normal or near normal stage of bone conditioning. I have even been known to describe stress fractures of the tibia as being like a sore shin in the hind leg.

An 'incomplete fracture' is another, plain English, term which we use to describe fractures but this, I feel, is a much more accurately descriptive term. When I hear that a recently sustained fracture is

'displaced' (big problem) or 'undisplaced' (Equine surgeon Ian Wright can probably rebuild it, to put it in simplistic terms).

I suppose you could argue that a stress fracture is an incomplete fracture. Of course it is incomplete, you can't even see the damn thing! But, in reality, we usually use the term 'incomplete' to describe fracture lines that we can see immediately with conventional imaging techniques but

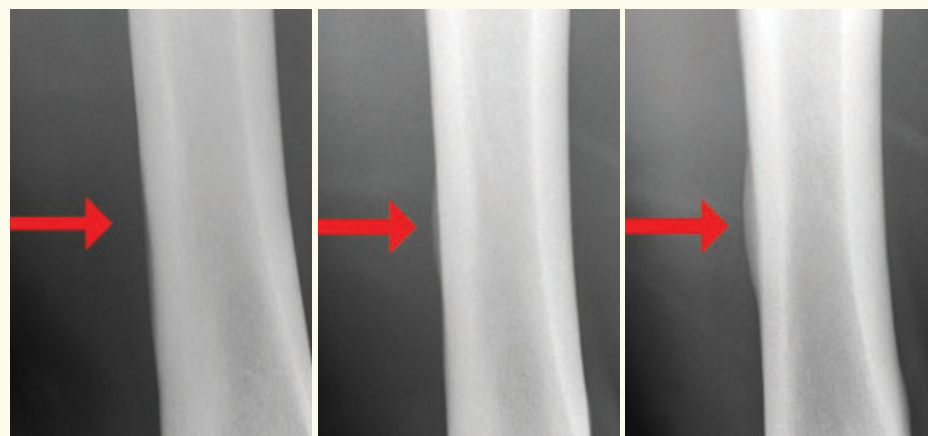
which do not extend the full way across the bone. That is, of course, unless you are a Racing Victoria vet. They have, apparently, described the

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'incomplete' there is a flood of relief. Had it been complete, if we were talking about a long limb bone such as the cannon bone, then it would usually be 'curtains'. An 'incomplete' fracture is exactly what it says on the tin, it is a fracture that doesn't go completely across the bone. A complete fracture separates the bone into two, or more, separate portions and is either

Hughie Morrison-trained Marmelo as having an incomplete fracture of his near-fore cannon bone and another incomplete fracture of his off-hind cannon bone (I wonder if the vets used the terms 'near' and 'off' or if they came from the media. I was taught always to use right and left: plain English that can be translated into plain French, or plain German, or plain Cantonese, unlike 'near' and 'off') which they identified using their new standing CT scanner. Are we to take it that these 'fractures' could not be seen using other, more conventional, imaging techniques?

Hughie Morrison described the findings as 'bone remodelling' which may, or may not, be a more accurate description of the CT scan findings than Racing Victoria's 'incomplete fractures'. The incident has sparked debate on the EVG (Equine Vet Group) forum, an online discussion forum for vets, and one contributor commented that 'the general consensus seems to be that fissures adjacent to the sagittal groove seen on CT are extremely common in the racehorse population and we simply do not



Repeated X-rays of a horse's tibia taken to show a callus formation

Straight Talking

Championship point

EVERY year, at around this time, I question the wisdom of the championships.

The trainers' championship is no longer of concern as we have, at last, seen sense and now run it on the basis of a calendar year. Although that decision could prove to be very significant this year if we see John Gosden and/or Aidan O'Brien running more horses on the all-weather in order to secure the title.

Behaviour

I argue continuously that we should structure our championships to drive behaviour in the interests of the sport. The current practice of ending the jockeys' championship in early October, before some very significant races have been run, and starting it in late April after some very significant races have been run, is lunacy. It may suit some individual jockeys who prefer not to brave our inclement weather, but it disadvantages those who work hardest, year round, in Britain and it does nothing to encourage the top jockeys to show their faces on British tracks in winter.

Far more important is the failure of the BHA, GBR and the ROA to make the owners' championship the most important and prestigious competition in British racing.

Owners alone could invest more in British racing to win the title if it was important for them to do so. As it stands, nobody cares.

It would not be difficult, and certainly not expensive, to make the owners' championships a more coveted prize.

Shame on those who have failed to do so.

understand enough yet to be making predictions about catastrophic injuries or using CT as a screening tool with any degree of confidence for predicting catastrophic outcome'. I don't know if this vet has more information on the actual findings than I have gleaned from reading the Racing Post but it seems that he does and, in any event, I concur with the principle that we simply do not know enough about interpreting CT images to be making predictions about risk based on such findings. The fact is that, even those who have had CT scanners for many years more than Racing Victoria, don't see enough 'normal', 'sound', horses (there is no reason to expose them to an expensive, unnecessary, CT scan) to say what is relevant and what is not.

Victimisation

Jamie Stier, Racing Victoria's head of integrity, seems to be at the forefront of this dispute and he is defending the vets and stewards against accusations of victimisation. Remember Jamie Stier? He was Chief Regulatory Officer at the BHA. He was the man who told us that hair testing could tell us whether a horse had had a prohibited substance in the last six months (or did he claim a year?) and pinpoint when it had it to within a month. I well remember a lengthy phone call I had with his veterinary director - then Lyn Hillier - on the subject, in which I was telling them that they should not make claims which they could not substantiate. And where are we on hair testing now? Hardly any further forward.

This situation has some similarity with this CT scanner debacle: you get a new toy and you jump in with both feet and say it is going to change the world. Big mistake.

Racing Victoria probably feel that they

are under the spotlight on the risk of equine fatalities but all they have done is brighten that spotlight. Yes, they can eliminate the chance of Marmelo suffering a catastrophic accident in the Melbourne Cup by removing him from the field. The same would apply to any other horse. If they reduce the field size, they have also reduced the risk of a fatality or serious injury but, if they don't reduce the field size, it is very debatable whether any amount of CT scanning or examination by vets will reduce the risk of injuries. All we know now is that a large number of people who might have been oblivious to the risks of racing in the Melbourne Cup are now focussed on the injury rate. A similar situation in some ways to that at Santa Anita where, instead of focussing on factors which they may be able to influence, such as track condition, they sought to place the blame for fatalities on others and, in so doing, endangered the very future of our sport.

Connections of Marmelo are considering legal action against Racing Victoria. It won't be a foregone conclusion as I have no doubt the stewards were acting in good faith but I dearly hope that Hughie Morrison and his team do take legal action, that they win, and that they are compensated to, at least, cover their costs and stop Racing Victoria vets from playing God, and Jamie Stier from playing vet.

IT has been reported that the owner has vowed to give any proceeds from a claim to charity. I wish he wouldn't. Racing Victoria run the Melbourne Cup for profit, their decision to remove his horse from the field was a commercial decision and he is fully entitled to pursue them for compensation on commercial grounds.