



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

A sad day, but what marvellous memories

IT's got me this time". That was the only reference that the Duke of Roxburghe made to his illness when I spoke to him on July 27 from Goodwood, just after Sheikh Hamdan's Elarqam had won the Sky Bet York Stakes G2 at York.

He then went on to discuss plans for his own horses and, of course, the future of Sheikh Hamdan's star. He continued to do so, by phone and text message, right up to the day before he finally succumbed to the cancer which had first been diagnosed 10 years ago. He talked of his dreams for Elarqam and Attraction's other progeny as if he would be here with us to watch the races and he allowed me to push the inevitable to the back of my mind and I discussed my plans with him just as we have done for the last 25 years, as if we would both go on forever.

I'm sure that was the best way to deal

with the situation, if there is a best way, but, when the sad day came and the memories of the good times came flooding back, I sort of wished we had spent some time reminiscing about the past rather than discussing the future that he will not see.

I had, for example, forgotten that the first horse I trained for him was the Miswaki filly, Potsclose, and that she won first time out for us on July 16, 1993 at Thirsk. Who would have thought then that that was the beginning of a partnership which, 10 years later, would own and train the great Attraction?

I had not forgotten the fun we had with the filly Fizzed when, together with his friend, then Lord Hartington, we travelled to Deauville with 20-odd of their families and friends in a chartered plane to watch her run in the G2 Prix d'Astarte. Lunch was arranged in the Drakar restaurant and

then a downpour, for which we were all totally unprepared, meant that we had to run across the road and buy umbrellas for the half-mile walk to the track. The filly finished second, which was deemed to be a very satisfactory result and she was sold soon afterwards – I'd guess for a tidy profit.

Attitude

And, of course, I'll never forget Attraction. I am often quoted as saying that Shamardal is the best horse I ever trained, but I trained him for only one season. Attraction won far more for us – five Group 1 races among her 10 wins – and she is, without doubt, the horse I am proudest of training and the horse that gave us far more pleasure than any other. Much of that is thanks to the attitude of her owner.

He made it fun and, considering how much was at stake, he never made anyone associated with her feel any pressure. From the day she won the Hilary Needler Trophy (Listed) at Beverley on her third start, he would remind us and the jockey, in the paddock before each race, that "she owes us nothing, everything is a bonus now". I well remember when she was beaten for the first time, on her ninth start, that he just said what a relief it was to no longer have that pressure of maintaining that unbeaten record. I have to say that the pressure of maintaining an unbeaten record, with three Group 1 wins on the trot, was a nice problem to have but he certainly made the defeat easier for me to take. Few owners would take it so well.

There are so many stories surrounding that one horse. The day he asked me to visit Floors to see a yearling he couldn't



The Duke with Kevin Darley after Attraction's win in the Group 1 Sun Chariot Stakes in 2004

get into a sale; my rejecting the offer of half of her to train her and declining the opportunity to find someone to lease her; her going to my late friend John Hills and him selecting her as the one, of three fillies he had for Guy, to come to me; her breaking her pedal bone after five wins at

two; meeting with Guy, his manager John Warren, and vets David Ellis and Nick Wingfield-Digby to decide on whether she might race again as a three-year-old; her returning to Floors for her recuperation and Guy complaining to stud groom Barry Hosie about his extravagance in lining the walls of her stable in rubber to a height of six feet, before Attraction kicked the light out; our walking the track before the Guineas and winning the race; supplementing for the Irish Guineas and winning again; our fruitless trip to Hong Kong and the resultant injury; a second comeback and another Group 1 win; and almost as many exciting times since she retired to stud. I hope someone writes the book.

WE will all miss Guy Roxburghe and his enthusiasm, tempered with feet-on-the-ground realism, for racing. I hope the dynasty, centred on Attraction and the other mares at Floors Stud, continues to flourish and brings success, fun, and great memories of Guy Roxburghe to his family and all those who have followed his horses for a long time to come.

THE FRANK TRUTH ABOUT FRANKEL

FRANKEL a failure? Alistair Fairclough (see Kickback, p. 9), you must be joking!

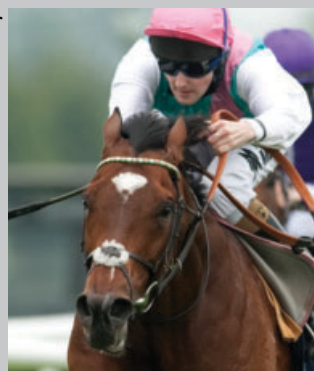
Actually, he isn't the first person I have heard say this. One of our owners, an avid student of form, expressed a similar opinion, but I think they are both wrong. I have to admit that I haven't studied any of the statistics on the horse but my impression is that he is very good indeed.

We haven't had very many of his progeny, for obvious reasons, as they are most often out of my price range when buying on 'spec'. But I'm struggling to think of a Frankel that we have had which has run and not won and that, as I have said many times, is the first test of a racehorse. Winning is the name of the game, but Frankel's progeny are every bit as much about quality as quantity and it is quite incredible that we have had Elarqam, Baghdad, King's Advice, Frankuus, Fred and Frankel's Storm from such a small number of horses by one sire.

And, while I may not have had enough of them to be sure that he will be a resounding success or made an effort to look

at his overall results, I can say for certain that they are not, as Mr Fairclough suggests, 'large and slow-looking'. Baghdad and King's Advice could never be described as 'large' and Fred, a two-time winner over seven furlongs already this year, is really quite small and shows so much speed that we are looking to try him back at six furlongs next time. He is very stoutly bred on the dam's side and I can only conclude that the speed comes from his father.

I can only hope that there are enough others out there who share Mr Fairclough's view for the cost of Frankel's progeny at the yearling sales to ease a bit. If it does, I'll be buying more. Then we'll see if they are slow. Our results with them so far suggest otherwise.



Frankel

Black type blues

BACK IN FEBRUARY, I quoted the great breeder Federico Tesio who famously said: "The thoroughbred exists because its selection has depended, not on experts, technicians or zoologists, but on a piece of wood: the winning post of the Epsom Derby. If you base your criteria on anything else, you will get something else, not the thoroughbred". I warned that we, and in particular the racing authorities, should not lose sight of this.

I was reminded of it again recently when our filly, Rose of Kildare, was ineligible to run in the Wackenhut Mercedes-Benz-Preis Zukunftsrennen (Group 3) at Baden-Baden, which she was entered for some time ago, as two-year-olds in Germany are not allowed to run more than eight times. Why?

They are effectively discriminating against those horses which have demonstrated their toughness and soundness in competition. Why on earth would they do this? Could it simply be to give the weaker horses a chance? Surely not, but nothing else makes any sense at all. It has to be to the detriment of the breed in Germany.

And we, in Britain, should take note as the BHA this year ruled against any horse running twice at the Cheltenham festival. Why did they do that? Could they ever consider a similar ruling at a Flat festival meeting? Royal Ascot? Could future generations of stallions be denied the opportunity to emulate Blue Point's feat of winning two Group 1 races in four days?

It is, of course, worth considering that such legislation which restricts the number of times that a horse can race takes no account of the number of times it gallops, or the speed of gallops, at home. Rose of Kildare has now raced nine times this year and galloped (fast work) on five occasions at home with the first gallop being on February 27 and the last on April 11. Those gallops were all over three furlongs and she hasn't galloped again, apart from in races, since. And, for the record, she has won three times, been placed twice, and earned £43,416. She has an official handicap rating of 94. Not bad for a filly that Charlie bought for 3,000 euros.

So, she missed out on an opportunity to race in Germany and earn some German "Black Type". Maybe it's more their loss than ours. Hopefully, she'll get her black type in Britain.