



Mark Johnston's

LET'S CALL THEM BOTH GREATEST!

I'D LIKE to say that I made my comments about Frankie Dettori and Lester Piggott to stimulate debate and fill the Kickback pages of the Kingsley Klarion. Had that truly been the idea, I could now claim to have fulfilled my objective (see page 10) but, of course, it didn't actually happen like that.

I was at a dinner a few nights before Ascot and Oli Bell introduced Frankie as the "greatest jockey" and added "with the exception of Lester Piggott, of course". It wasn't a big deal and nobody commented on it at the time, but it was a little bit like welcoming Enable into the winner's enclosure as the greatest mare with the exception of Treve, or Dahlia, or Allez France.



Frankie Dettori and Lester Piggott

Some of you will immediately say that that is not a fair comparison as Enable's race record exceeds that of any mare and most horses. If you do think that, feel free to write to Kickback and help fill next month's pages, but back to Frankie and Lester.

What you see in Kickback is only the tip of the iceberg. I was bombarded with comment – some quite abusive, calling me every kind of idiot and worse – on social media and many listed the reasons why Lester's record is incomparable and unlikely ever to be matched. I can't really disagree but I still think it is unnecessary to make the comparison.

Frankie is the greatest jockey that most people have seen ride. You have to be well into the second half of life to remember "the Long Fellow" riding, although I am one of those trainers who can still boast that I had the great man ride for me and I certainly will never forget that ride on Royal Academy in the Breeders' Cup.

But, why not just let it be said that Frankie is the greatest jockey, until he retires? And then let's hope that there is someone riding in Britain who can fill that role and help keep our racing at the front on the world stage.

BHA blunderers who need a kick where it hurts

"NO publicity is bad publicity". So the old adage goes, but we all know that it isn't always true. Charles Ratner certainly knows that it isn't true as one silly, jovial, comment killed his business.

The BHA should certainly know it isn't true as they have dropped enough clangers and drawn enough bad publicity on themselves and the sport in general to educate even the most dimwitted spokesperson. So why do they keep doing it?

Last month I asked you to imagine what it would do for the public perception of integrity in football if the FA called inquiries into the performance of teams when they were beaten favourites. That analogy came to me in the spur of the moment when writing that piece but, over the last month, I have been thinking about it a lot. The BHA boast that they are leaders in the field of integrity in sport but other governing bodies should look very carefully before allowing themselves to be led. The BHA's own publicity machine constantly portrays our sport as having integrity issues and then claims to be the guardian of the punters' interests. They have done, and continue to do, untold damage to the image of the sport.

Negative

A recent "tweet" (they put countless postings on Twitter every day and most, to my mind, portray a negative image of our sport) boasted of how many "dope" tests they had carried out on horses post-race, how many tests they had carried out prior to races, and how many in-training tests (the, so called, "dawn raids") they had carried out on trainers' premises (and we are talking thousands). No mention of the purpose or result of these tests. Does this tell us that there is a huge doping problem in horseracing or none at all? I'm not sure what they are trying to suggest. If it is none at all, why are they spending such vast sums of money on testing?

And it is not only in the field of integrity that they are bringing the sport into disrepute and portraying a negative image of us all. Their approach on welfare is, arguably, even worse. Many of the tweets they put out involve details of their veterinary officers' examination of horses post-race. This is, arguably, unethical and certainly contravenes the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' code of conduct for their members but, much more important, is the misleading nature of the reports.

Some, inevitably, will be inaccurate as they are one veterinary surgeon's opinion resulting from a very cursory examination of the animal, but they are posted by the BHA as if fact and, almost invariably, there is the inference that the

Straight Talking

finding had some bearing on the horse's performance when the reality is that, in most cases, that will not be the case. Furthermore, all but the most serious of issues are quite likely to be irrelevant when they are the result of these limited examinations immediately post-race. In what other sport would a medical practitioner examine, in the minutes after the competition, a participant who had not suffered a fairly serious injury?

In caring for our own horses, we of course examine them immediately post-race for any sign of an injury which might require urgent attention. Thankfully, these are very rare. They are then observed by the groom and travelling manager during the cooling-off period, again for signs of anything serious that requires attention. They are then checked again before they leave the racecourse, when they get home, and the next morning before they are given any exercise (usually walking exercise the day after a race).

Minor stiffness, soreness and even some lameness is considered to me a common, if not normal, finding immediately post-race as it would be in many, if not most, competitors in even the lowest levels of sport. We do not attempt to gauge the significance of such findings until the next morning but, by that time, the BHA will have already put it out on Twitter that our horse is lame, suggesting to punters that this had a bearing on the result and to the rest of the world that this horse was injured by racing. They most commonly look at beaten favourites and they almost never look at winners. If they did, they would find that the incidence of soreness and lameness in winners and placed horses is almost identical to the incidence among the also-rans. Their policy does not give this impression at all.

AND these tweets pale into insignificance when compared to the recent one about Simon Crisford's groom being fined £200 for "acting in an aggressive manner" towards his horse. When I first read of the incident, in the Racing Post, I thought, as most others probably still do, that the groom had aggressively, and maliciously, kicked this horse. I now know that the sequence of events was altogether different from that suggested by the BHA and disseminated to millions of people by social media and, consequently, the Racing Post, Horse and Hound, the Sun, the Daily Mail, and many other mainstream publications.

The incident took place in the racecourse stable area out of sight of members of the public who might have been forgiven for misinterpreting the situation and the problems began long before the groom lay hand, or foot, on the horse. Due to noise from a funfair, horses had to be moved from some stables and the colt in question was stabled beside fillies. As a

consequence of this, or perhaps just due to being a big "stroppy" colt, the animal was upset and aroused when being led from his stable. He had an erection, a fairly common occurrence in young colts when upset

or excited at the races and it is common – dare I say, good – practice to squirt it with cold water or even flick it with a cloth to make the colt put it away and bring him back under control of the handler.

The groom, apparently, being alone and without water or other implement to help address the situation, used his foot against the colt's erection as the only means available to him. Whether this constituted a kick or was done with aggression I cannot say, but I can say that, when a colt is being aggressive, you do sometimes have to act aggressively, at least in manner and tone of voice, to get the better of him.

The rest is history. A BHA Equine Welfare Officer (I don't know what qualifications, experience, or skill you need for that job) reported it to the stewards, the stewards fined the groom, the BHA publicity machine put it out on Twitter, and it spread across British and international media channels and publications. Very clever.

Compromised

What should have happened? Well, why didn't this Equine Welfare Officer, if any sort of a horseperson at all, go to the groom's assistance and provide some water. Or, if that wasn't possible and it was truly an act of aggression which compromised the welfare of the horse (I very much doubt that was the case), would a "hey, don't do that" not have sufficed? And, when it did get from the stable yard to the stewards' room, they should have nipped it in the bud there. But, no, they had to tell the world that trainers and grooms are cruel to horses and they are there to punish us for being so.

It is not Simon Crisford who needs to look at the people he is employing and how they are doing their job.