

EDITORIAL

Where do we go from here?

Just where our sport goes is an interesting question. Not easy to answer but needed nonetheless. Things are not what I really want them to be but saying that there are many positives. Some events that have happened recently which have left me amazed, dismayed, encouraged and excited, depressed and not a little bit fed up.

Whether you realise it or not we have a good sport. The racing we have is good, well managed, easy to access, exciting to watch and interesting to get involved with. In mid May I attended the World Trotting Conference in Oslo and saw some of the World Driving Championship as well as quality racing from Norway's leading track Bjerkeban. Returning on the Sunday night I hot footed it to Appleby for the Monday meeting and what I saw was a sporting spectacle so far ahead of the Norwegians it was untrue. Looking back over 30 years of 'Globetrotting' I have seen racing in France, Holland, Germany Norway, Italy, Belgium, America and New Zealand and have never come back saying that our racing is second rate. Our tracks aren't as good as the best foreign courses, our horses not quite as good as the World's best, but we are not 'Mickey Mouse'. Our horse people are as good as any, anywhere. Bob Lee's grandson who is living in Norway with his girlfriend bought a 'chancy' horse and won with it on 25th May in under 2:00. Is he yet another in a steady stream of Brits working abroad who, over many years have proven they can compete with the best?

Musselburgh this year is 116 years old. The July meeting will be one of the best ever witnessed. Bill Farnsworth the racecourse Manager is throwing his weight into the promotion, there will be an interesting new menu of racing, giving even more opportunities to top class horses. And hopefully there will be exposure in the Betting shops.

However we are not moving forward as we should. In March we had the money. The racing dates and venues in place so that virtually every week from May onwards, the last race on a number of Thoroughbred cards was a Harness Race available to bet on in a Betting shop. This major initiative was a major step forward, providing exposure to the Betting Public and finance for our sport. Our friends in Thoroughbred racing have set this back somewhat. However the questions that needed answering have been answered and the situation now is that there is a chink of light at the end of a long dark tunnel. We have a good team addressing these matters, led by Lord Lipsey and aided by Arena Leisure (who own and operate Wolverhampton Racecourse) as well as David Hood of William Hill. The situation at present is that Nic Coward CEO of the British Horse Racing Authority has gone on record by saying that providing a racecourse

makes application and there is a need, then in principle a Harness Race can slot onto the end of a Thoroughbred meeting. Hopefully the prestigious and popular William Hill series will be back on track. We have converted any doubt at Arena Leisure into full blown support for Harness Racing and you are all to thank for this, owners, officials, trainers, drivers, fans who attended the races and horses. We put on great racing and did it well.

In Ireland the situation is the same but different (If that's not Irish!) They are fighting to be able to use a Thoroughbred racecourse for a full meeting. By the time you read this article hopefully the green light will have been given in the Emerald Isle. Mark Flanagan has worked very hard on this with Political assistance from Bertie Aherne. The hope is to have racing at Dundalk on Saturday evenings alternating with Greyhounds. I understand that the influential Thoroughbred Trainers Association has agreed so hopefully things will now proceed.

What is surprising is that we are the ONLY established jurisdiction in the World without finance from Off Track Betting. Friends at the WTC (who all get and read this magazine) are amazed at our position. If the Thoroughbred world has questions to answer, so be it! Surely they don't want to keep us out? If so why? There is a bigger threat to them from Betting Exchanges and Sports Betting than there ever could be from a few Harness Races once a week. We would not even scratch the surface of their betting turnover.

So if the Thoroughbred people are cautious some of you are either timid or not interested in progress. Do you want me to continue to push? Sometimes I wonder. What does it take for some of you to wake up and smell the coffee? Many of you will stump up good money to buy a horse, equipment, pay training fees yet if asked to be a member of a club or association (so that your voice is heard through the correct channels) or assist when your local track needs a hand, you regularly decline to get involved. To take the sport forward we all need to pull together, forget old differences, believe in what we have and what we could be and say 'I am going to do my bit to take this sport forward'. All of you are Ambassadors. Please act like one.

The 'settling of an old score' by people who are not involved in our sport at Appleby recently is of no help whatsoever. It was contained, dealt with and was in essence no more than an outburst by people fuelled by too much beer. However we can do without it. The cowardly, improper and out of character behaviour by the former licence holder Watson Harrop Jnr at York in April towards Barry Delaney was quite staggering. Yet young Mr Harrop tells me he wants Harness Racing to

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move forward - He has a strange way of showing it. Bad behaviour at whatever level, is not acceptable, but what are your views? Is it always some one else's affair, are you prepared to stand up and be counted?

The election at the AGM brought forward an interesting array of Stewards (the Directors of the BHRC) . Will you give them the respect and assistance they deserve, will they serve the sport as is their duty? We shall watch this space as they say. John Wright was returned as a Steward augmented by the new additions of Fred Hay from Scotland, Dawn Forrest from the North East and Jackie Maguire from Wales. We now have good and adequate coverage across the country, with a balanced team of Stewards rich in experience, varied in background, representing a wide demographic spread and a gender balance. With four ladies on board the BHRC can not be accused of being misogynist. It is surprising how in hearings, would be rowdy Licence holders calm down when Stella Havard cracks the whip. We now have a quartet of strong independent women to answer to. God help us I hear some of you saying. Fred Hay has a long pedigree and has been an ardent supporter of racing for many years. His knowledge coupled with a dry sense of humour is a great asset to the brotherhood. Personally I was saddened by the resignation of Iain McLaren. He is a quiet man, never saying much but when he speaks he is worth listening to. He has helped me out a number of times, with a well turned touch of phrase or the ability to get to the root of a problem effortlessly. Family needs dictate his departure but I will always welcome him back should he feel the need to return. I thank him for his help and wish him well.

Just where should the management of the sport be going? I believe the office, after an admittedly difficult year in 2008 is running well. I get more compliments than complaints. However there is still room for improvement. One area where you can help the office to help you is the timing of your licence renewal and race fee applications. Send them in pre April and the office can turn things round in a day or two. Leave it until the last minute in May or June and the timescale becomes a week or two, such is the mad rush of licence and race fee applications.

The drug testing campaign continues with even better testing procedures now in place. The Handicapping system seems to be working well, my only comments would be perhaps a little more simplification, perhaps a bit more widening of bands and definitely more Conditioned and Selling Races on offer. When your horse reaches a point in the system where it is uncompetitive Condition and Selling races should be there for it. At the AGM meeting stiffer penalties were voted through for driving infringements. If your driving is dodgy expect a strong fine and substantial suspension. Safety of horse and driver is paramount.

It is the aspiration of most of you to have a pure Yankö in your stable and to be true many of the recent American imports are tremendous horses. For Dreamfair Samurai to win back to back Appleby Finals , this year as a Grade 12, shows he is some horse. Crown Manhattan is a top-notch performer, but so is Laneside Lexus and The Big Guy cannot be underestimated. At the World Trotting Conference a lot of time was devoted to the perils of inbreeding. It affects many breeds, Holstein Cattle, American Standardbreds, Thoroughbreds, almost all pedigree dogs. The French trotter is secure in its future because of the limited American bloodlines admitted a few years ago. Sweden is very keen to avoid inbreeding and matings are evaluated by the use of the mathematical formula known as the Coefficient of Inbreeding. A half brother sister mating is 0.125. Deweycheatumnhowe, last year's top US trotting three year old has a coefficient of 0.187. Very closely bred. It obviously didn't hurt him but really how far can the Americans go. They are getting concerned, as are the Coldblood breeders of Scandinavia. Australia and New Zealand are safe because they use largely Colonial mares similar bred to our own oldtime mares. Virtually pure North American bloodlines but a bit different. If we throw away our old bloodlines I think it will be a sad loss in the long term.

The future is uncertain, I believe someday we will be in the betting shops or available via a BHRC Internet Gambling site. We are just too good to be forgotten for ever. We have a long heritage championed by people such as Lord Langford and Tom Menzies. The sad losses over the last few months of Neville Lever, Gordon Barker and Cyril Prickett are hard to bear. Neville was Chairman of Eden Valley Harness Racing Association, a one time Steward of the BHRC, past President of Stagbi, family man and horse lover. Gordon 'The Voice' Barker was the most entertaining Race Commentator we ever had. A knowledgeable horseman (His horse You're The Man was an undisputed champion) and thoroughly nice guy was characterised by his signature line 'Well folks that was a cracker!'. Cyril Prickett, Solicitor Coroner and leading light in the running of the now defunct Kendal track was an authority on the sport. They were all men who in their own particular way tried hard for this sport. Peter Jennison of West Yorkshire died recently. He was a dedicated horseman, a good trainer, solid driver and lifelong fan. Born in Keighley, his first horse was Miss Ashfield, he trained a few good ones including Red Emilli and his own Nat's Pride with whom he won a lot of races. His ashes were scattered on the track at York. Perhaps all these friends will be watching from that great Trotting Track in the sky. I hope they see us working together and going forward.

Gordon Garnett