

EDITORIAL

It's strange how you remember things from your childhood. The first really good horse I remember was Dan Matthews, the first race I think was Kilnsey, but I remember well, sat at home one night when I would have been about 6 or 7 with my Dad talking to Billy and Joe Hird and Enoch Varey about a meeting they had been to at a Pub in Appleby where this Australian chap called Noel Simpson was telling them all about the track he was going to build in Prestatyn in North Wales. And the thing I remember most was that Noel Simpson had said something to the effect that whatever strokes the British trotting men pulled, the Aussies could deal with them because and I quote verbatim "We have forgot more than you have ever known". Didn't quite work out like that.

Life, nature, geography its all cyclical. David Wilson reminded me that the opening of Prestatyn was 50 years ago. Fifty years before that in 1913 our sport was probably at its zenith in terms of popularity and 50 years before that it existed, but not life as we know it Captain Kirk.

Match racing with trotting cobs had given way to highly organised racing on

about 40 urban tracks nationwide. There was very little grass track racing. The horses were of three types: imported American Standardbreds, Icelandic pacing ponies and their crosses with US blood and trotting cobs and their crosses. The sport could compete with Thoroughbred racing because there was no off track betting, the tracks being smaller were easier to build in urban areas so people could walk, cycle or catch the train there, easily. And competition for the leisure Pound (or shilling then) was limited. But by the outbreak of war cracks were beginning to show: horse quality, handicapping and skulduggery within the ranks, were major issues. By the end of WWI we were in trouble, mix with a worldwide depression which lasted until WWII and we were a different sport. Most permanent tracks became Greyhound tracks, we retreated to grass fields, "Colours" were replaced by working clothes, the sulky gave way to the saddle, flat caps worn backwards were the de rigueur headwear and we never have completely shaken off that dowdy image. We had a "dead cat bounce" as the share dealers say post WWII but that didn't last.

long. And then came Mr Simpson.

The building of Prestatyn was a volcano in the landscape of harness racing which has left an indelible irreversible change. It modernised us. Most of what we do, most of how we do it traces to Prestatyn. When Mr Simpson undertook his big venture, grass racing dominated with only one permanent track in England, Moorside Stadium at Droylsden near Manchester, a cinders track with very basic facilities and a reputation for not being run fairly. The owners raced horses and won a lot of races. It does not behove to speak ill of the dead, so I won't, but perception is a big feature in life and the perception was that the Dodd family "cut things up" for themselves. When Prestatyn opened Charlie Blisset, John's father was the leading owner and on opening night of 26th July 1963 Cheerio won the feature mile and a quarter race in the then electric time of 2.42. But the honeymoon did not last and in 1964 Noel Simpson was the leading owner, that went down well, I can tell you. Even though Mr Simpson's experiment failed and only lasted about 7 or 8 years it changed us big time. New horses, new rules, a governing body, drug testing, new people. New everything. But when Mr Noel went back to Australia ready to embark

on bigger bolder ventures there I think he realised he had not forgot more than we had ever known! Lessons in life are often learned the hard way, but there are lessons we ought not to need teaching.

The most successful racing model has probably been Kendal, a track built on diversification. The Westmoreland County Showground and trotting track, it was well run by Jim Stewart Snr, his brother Mr William Stewart and Geoff Sedgwick. I knew the Stewarts better than Mr Sedgwick and whilst I cannot be so bold as to say they were the most honest, straightest men I have ever met, I can certainly say they were in the top two. Theirs was a model to be admired and copied, they had a professional Secretary Mrs Prykett who took no prisoners and asked for no favours. If you entered a horse it raced, unless she told you why it couldn't.

It's not easy to get a horse to the races and when the gate rolls away you are entitled to a fair start, it is not acceptable for the starter to appear not to understand the rules relating to starting and thereby prejudice your chances. The track has a mandatory duty to have a second official in place (H17) to stop the race if there is any issue thereby having a backstop fail save measure in

place. Of course it's not acceptable for a generally charming gracious lady trainer run to the start car and scream at the starter in terms that might make a Sergeant Major blush. She did have a point, but perhaps could have expressed it a little differently. She intimates that it won't happen again, can I do the same for her? Please read the guidance note I issued to all track personnel and Stewards after the said debacle.

It's not politically correct for horses to be unacceptably hit on or off the track. The latter is rare but the former more frequent. I once saw a driver, generally a "good lad" on top of things most of the time hit a horse with no chance at least 35 times. He got a whip ban. The sooner Stewards take all licences away....owner, trainer, driver for a period of say three months the sooner drivers will realise excessive whipping is verboten. It's a bit like drink driving in Sweden. It doesn't happen because if you are caught over the limit you go to prison for a year. One or two outright bans and we wouldn't have an issue. Our lot would learn quicker than Mr Simpson did, I think. It's always the exception that proves the rule. Most drivers drive very well, apply the whip moderately and appropriately and we all live happily ever

after. But then someone loses his temper and it makes the job look bad.

So where are we going over the next 50 years? At present we are in survival mode, but doing OK. Racing is good, crowds coming back and some jolly good horses, well trained well driven, giving some really exciting racing. The major races have been held in the main, in good weather, spirits running high and horses racing well. The Evans family bred a multiple Crock of Gold winner in Scoot Around and have now won it with his half brother family bred, owned trained and driven. The Famous Musselburgh Pace had four horses on the line making it one of the most exciting finishes in years, with Springhill Alibi just going enough to win. The Hurricane was won by an exceptional three year old Ontop Girlcharmer who repeated the next day in the Three Year old Pace and saw Stevie Lees parade in front of the crowd Herve Filion/Hot Hitter style stood on the sulky seat. I have known Steve for over thirty years and on a good day no better horseman has ever held the reins. Welcome back. Camden Daniel is on the comeback trail and in the opinion of the man whom I think understands him best, John Gill, it is the ability to train the brain with that great little horse that

matters the most. Will we have more trotters, breed them and make forays into Europe? John Love seems to have something special in Montana Queen. If we buy Franco American mares and breed to modern

trotting stallions there is no reason why we cannot pick up prizes in Europe. Or be an outpost of France and breed les Trotteurs Francais! trust Noel Simpson sat in that great racetrack in the sky looks down benignly

upon us realising he kick started what we have now , that we still have a long way to go, but at least we are trying. He should be proud.

Gordon Garnett
