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Debating the upgrading

THIS month's Kingsley Kickback is surely the best we have ever had with your letters and our replies stretching to three pages. It really makes for a good read. Please keep it up.

I have read Peter Metcalfe's entertaining letter several times, along with John Scanlon's reply after John's offending piece in the February Klarion, and cannot help but agree with Mr Metcalfe that the inference was that Crafty Choice's Zetland Stakes of 2014 was not up to Listed race standard. In fact, of the last three runnings, the 2014 race was the only one to pass the threshold of 95 for the average, end-of-season, rating for the first four home. Furthermore, Hartnell's race in 2013 returned the lowest average rating.

Confident

No matter, the important thing is that the European Pattern Committee have dispensed with the rigid rule in this case and upgraded the race. I think it is most certainly the right decision and I am confident that the Zetland Stakes will be much better for it. As a Listed race it will surely attract a few more runners and, even looking at its performance as a Conditions race in the years which John highlights, it has performed very well. Of the nine horses placed from 2011 to 2013, which would have been allocated 'black-type', only Automated (third behind Hartnell) failed to achieve a rating well in excess of 90 at some point in its career.

Edging towards the Breeze-Ups

I BOUGHT our first winner, Hinari Video, way back in 1987, at a Breeze-Up sale. Two years later, I bought our first Listed winner, Lifewatch Vision, the same way. Since then we have had some very notable winners, including Rainfall, Gulf Of Naples and Fox Hunt from Breeze-Ups but I wasn't responsible for buying any of them.

I have bought very few horses at Breeze-Up sales. That is partly down to the fact that the sales come after the season has started and, at that time of year, I have not been willing to speculate on buying horses without having orders or prospective owners in mind. I did have owners with me when I bought Hinari Video and Lifewatch Vision but the Breeze-Up sales have changed in others ways which led to me bypassing them.

Back in those early days the horses galloped in pairs or even, sometimes, in threes. I used to put my usual effort into researching the pedigrees, as I do to this day with yearling sales, I examined the horses in the same way as I have always done with yearlings, I put the same emphasis on conformation, and I put a great deal of effort into assessing the gallop and the relative merits of the horses and riders. I looked to buy the horse that had come off worst of the pair if I was confident that it had more room for improvement and was, in particular, better value. Overall, I was comfortable that I was offering my owners a comprehensive service and that no stone was left unturned in the search for winners and an edge over other buyers.

Then things changed and vendors all began to gallop their horses alone. There is nothing to compare them with, except the clock, and gradually the most professional

buyers started to time the horses (no official timing system is in place). I made an effort to time all horses at a few sales but felt, if anything, that it made it harder to get value for money.

It soon became clear that there was some sort of link between time and price but I was far from certain that there was going to be a correlation between time and ability on the track. It seemed fairly obvious to me that if, and it was a big if, such a link could be established, those with the most sophisticated and accurate timing devices, and the deepest pockets, would have all the best horses. That was never going to be me and, in any case, I know enough about horses to know that it was never going to be that simple.

Influential

Then along comes James Willoughby with his mathematician's hat on, and his statistician friend Jason Hathorn, and they tell me that they have established a clear link between breeze time and future ability but, of course, it isn't a simple link and there are many other influential factors. However, some of those factors are also measurable, and they can refine their analysis of times to a point where they believe they can offer a clear edge.

I am not one to fall for claims of turning lead into gold but this pair are not alchemists. They know the odds against buying winners at the sales and the much longer odds against buying good winners. They have studied those odds, and the factors affecting them, in great detail and all they claim is that they can shift the balance a little in our favour.

That was enough for me. I had little hesi-



Mark's first Listed winner, Lifewatch Vision

tation in saying that I would like to be part of this project. They will work with me at the forthcoming breeze-up sales and I will be looking to buy horses. I hope that some of you might also want to be involved and might even give me a specific order to buy a two-year-old but, in addition to any orders, I will aim to buy up to five horses on 'spec' and will pass them on, in our usual way, at purchase price plus training costs from fall of the hammer. All costs of attending sales, researching catalogues, pre-purchase examinations, and James and Jason's analysis will be borne by MJR.

I will attend the sales at Doncaster and Tattersalls as in the past, but James and Jason have already made it clear that we

must not overlook the Ascot Breeze-Up, which produced The Wow Signal last year, or the Goresbridge sale in Ireland which has now established itself as Europe's largest flat Breeze-Up sale. There is value to be had at these sales.

I am very excited about this and particularly delighted to be, at last, working on something with James Willoughby. As he mentions briefly in his article in this Klarion (p.14), he came to me with a fledgling of an idea on what he might be able to bring to our business way back in 1991. It has just taken us nearly quarter of a century to get around to putting it into practice.

Who knows where it might lead?

Shedding some light?

ALSO in Kickback this month is a letter from Ronald McArdle and a detailed reply from Neil Mechie about our new lighting systems. I received this correspondence first by e-mail and maybe was a bit short with my reply to Ronald.

Horses may be among the dumbest of the domestic animals but even they aren't going to stand with their heads out of the door for hours looking into darkness. Please note that, in the pictures which Mr McArdle refers to, despite our photographer Mikaelle taking pictures with her flash gun, only six of 18 horses have bothered to poke their heads out for a look.

Also, although Neil goes into detail to explain why the lights will still affect the horses, it is noted that the lights are not only there to affect horses' biorhythms. In the short time the lights have been in place we have established that they do definitely affect the growth of a winter coat, but we are also fairly convinced that they dramatically cut the incidence of fungal skin infections (ringworm).

When I think of this, it often reminds me that, in the bad old days when I first entered the horseracing business, I often heard people repeating the old adage that 'owners are like mushrooms, they want keeping in the dark and feeding a load of s—t!'. It isn't a policy or attitude towards owners that I have ever condoned but I have often used the theory on mushrooms to explain to our grooms that fungal spores are adversely affected by sunlight.

GOING TO THE DOGS

WE shouldn't look gift horses in the mouth and Kempton Park's initiative, to give six entry wristbands to owners of entered horses, whether the horse runs or not, must be welcomed. But Vivian and Heather Pratt's novel use for these wristbands (see Kickback, p.8)), sadly, sums up the value to most owners of entry to the average all-weather race meeting.

The sad fact is that most owners don't go all-weather racing even when their horse does run, never mind when it doesn't. And the same can be said for most race-going members of the public who, apparently, made 5.8 million visits to racecourses last year. How many of those attended all-weather meetings, I wonder?

Do we want more of this? The racecourses clearly do. As long as they have a media deal which pays as much for a Class 6 handicap at Wolverhampton as it does for the Grand

National or the Derby, they think they have a licence to print money and all they need to do is put on more and more low-grade, low prize-money races. Hence they are all clamouring for an all-weather surface and as many fixtures as they can lay their hands on. It really doesn't matter to them whether people pay to go in or not. Gate money is just more icing on the cake.

Where will it all end? It isn't really too hard to imagine. Just take a look at BAGS greyhound racing.