

RACING POST Sunday

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'DRUG TALK
MUST STOP –
YOU CAN'T TEAR
THE SPORT
APART WITH
NO FACTS'

The Big Read

Ireland editor **Richard Forristal** hears some forthright views from Aidan O'Brien

BALLYDOYLE'S tranquillity is rarely more palpable than on a bright autumn morning. The sun casts a lengthy shadow over Slievenamon as it rises to the east, and the leaves on those big green canopies that line the long entrance avenue are turning brown and beginning to float to the ground. Summer's rich bloom is tapering off.

Aidan O'Brien is invariably that soothing influence made flesh. While he can be unmistakably uptight and tentative, his demeanour rarely betrays any hint of rancour. It has been a funny old year, though.

This time 12 months ago, the 51-year-old and his sons Joseph and Donnacha were compelled to withdraw their 11 intended runners on the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe card at Longchamp.

Five horses from other stables had tested positive for the prohibited substance Zilpaterol in France and, when a batch of Gain nuts was

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identified as the common denominator, it eventually led to the O'Briens scratching their horses from the single most important card in the European Flat schedule.

O'Brien snr had sent samples from the relevant horses to be analysed in France Galop's Laboratoire des Courses Hippiques (LCH) and they returned positive, although LGC's Newmarket lab, which is the one used by the BHA and the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, failed to identify the Zilpaterol.

Among the ramifications was that Mother Earth, an intended starter in the Prix Marcel Boussac at Longchamp, had to be diverted to the Fillies' Mile. She and Snowfall were then mixed up in an embarrassing gaffe at Newmarket.

It all meant that O'Brien found himself at the centre of a negative news cycle. Throw in the pandemic, which also played a part in the Fillies' Mile foul-up due to a team of staff being based in Britain but not familiar with the horses, and it has made for a challenging spell.

"It has been a different sort of year," O'Brien agrees as he waits for his lengthy string of bluebloods to file back down past him after their swinging canter.

"But there is no handbook for training horses. There are so many variables, and that whole episode had no end of consequences that you wouldn't imagine. Like, St Mark's Basilica was meant to go to France as well, but then we had to run him in the Dewhurst. If he hadn't run

'THERE IS NO HANDBOOK FOR TRAINING HORSES. THERE ARE SO MANY VARIABLES'

there, Wembley would have won, and that changed their careers.

"Then we had the fillies at Newmarket. It's a bit like on your phone, when you want to change an app and they all start shivering and the whole thing is moving. If you make one quick move with one, the whole thing gets jumbled up on you."

I put it to him that such a tumultuous disruption, when horses have been primed and the pressure is on, can't have been easy to stomach. It is at this point that O'Brien starts to get animated and speaks with the sort of fluent conviction that we don't normally associate with him.

"It wasn't," he accepts, "but you have to keep moving forward. I suppose the worst thing was that the Zilpaterol issue gave the conspiracy theorists fuel. It had nothing at all to do with us, yet people were suggesting this and that – all sorts of nonsense."

YOU'D be aware of the more fanciful theories doing the rounds on social media? "Of course we are," he volleys. "We all live in this world, but that sort of stuff should not be put out there."

"In the past, if someone wanted to put information out there that wasn't true, they'd have to go through the media or someone in a position of responsibility, and they'd then use their professionalism or education or discretion to make a judgement call. Now, people can just throw stuff out there and it takes off. That's the way it is."

Before October 2020 was out, Jim Bolger, who was such a formative influence on O'Brien, said in various incendiary media interviews that drug cheats were the "number one problem in Irish racing" and that he wasn't operating "on a level playing field".

The Coolcullen trainer, who has said his staff



(Main picture) Aidán O'Brien on the gallops at Ballydoyle; (top right) the trainer's main Arc contender Snowfall; (above right) with the recently retired St Mark's Basilica

are the source of much of his intelligence on illegal drug use, doubled down this summer by declaring "there will be a Lance Armstrong in Irish racing".

Bolger has never fully elaborated on his allegations, and he passed up the opportunity to do so when the cross-party Agriculture Committee invited him to appear before them when it convened three sessions to address his comments. In that void, people will have jumped to their own conclusions.

Does O'Brien have faith in the IHRB's testing procedures and independence?

"Absolutely," he responds. "We had them in here last week with the Department of Agriculture and all the horses were sampled, hair and all, and that's the way it should be. They are doing their best and, like every other jurisdiction, they are keeping up to speed."

But, as we now know, there was a time before the switch to LGC when the regulator wasn't equipped to test for a variety of prohibited substances, and it didn't look great that LGC wasn't able to identify Zilpaterol to the level that LCH was.

"Okay, but we've always been competing all over the world, so the way we have always approached everything is the same as if we were racing in France or Hong Kong or anywhere, the

whole time. It has never been the case that we've said, 'We're in Ireland, so we'll do this or that.' We have always operated in such a way that it would stand up to scrutiny anywhere in the world."

The bear has been poked now. O'Brien is speaking with rare candour, and is adamant that the manner in which what he deems unsubstantiated allegations have garnered so much airtime is reckless. He has clearly been riled by it all and the vehemence of his tone shatters the illusion of autumnal calm.

"It has all been very damaging for racing and unnecessary," he insists. "The saying goes that loose lips sink ships, and we've all seen in life how rumours can damage people even if they are completely unfounded. People's lives can be destroyed once things are put out there. That could happen in racing."

"People shouldn't be talking out the side of their mouths. My thing would always be that nothing is ever hidden, but you can't be listening to pub talk."

"I'm all for things to be written and discussed, but don't try to expose stuff that's not there. Speak the truth, and don't be afraid to speak the truth, but people in Irish racing have worked too hard for 50 years to build its reputation as a racing jurisdiction that isn't reliant on drugs."

"The IHRB should keep checking and testing, because there will always be people who take chances, but the authorities have a responsibility to everyone to do the right thing and not be afraid to do it."

"As I say, people talking out the side of their mouths, and the way they are entertained then by those who don't have the facts, that all has to stop. There are lots of people who rely on Irish

racing to make a living – it shouldn't be dragged through the mud."

"For everyone who breeds a horse, trains a horse, rides a horse or sells a horse, it has to stop. People can't be tearing apart the sport with no facts. At the end of the day, reputation in every part of life is vital – it's all any of us have."

And the suggestion that doping is endemic within Irish racing?

"Again, I can only speak for us here, and for Joseph and Donnacha, and there is no such extreme they would go to. Like, we are a bit unique here in that we don't even inject joints – we never have – yet that's being done all over the world. But if there is any risk that anything could contaminate a horse, we don't do it, and we never have. Now, there are veterinary practices everywhere where they inject joints and give the horses so many days, but we have never done it."

THE use of such corticosteroid injections, which are commonly deployed anti-inflammatories to help maintain horses in training who are prone to jarring joints that then swell up, has sparked debate from time to time.

Consensus is that judicious use of the injections is acceptable, as they are not painkillers so don't give a false impression of soundness. However, they are banned on raceday, hence O'Brien's caution.

On the topic of lameness, another issue that the armchair veterinary surgeons have postulated about on social media and elsewhere has been the fatal injury suffered by Anthony

PICTURES: PATRICK McCANN, CAROLINE NORRIS AND ALAN CROWHURST



Van Dyck in the Melbourne Cup. The death of the first Derby winner to run in the Australian showpiece prompted a wide-ranging report that has led to major changes that will ultimately deter many European runners.

O'Brien is conscious of the murmurings that the horse, who had finished second in the Caulfield Cup weeks beforehand, wasn't in a fit shape to race. He bristles at the idea, and stresses that his team was led by Racing Victoria's veterinary experts.

"Anthony Van Dyck was never a big mover, but we were always happy with him," he says. "The Racing Victoria vets started looking at him and they suggested that we could do a nerve block on him. We never do nerve blocks - never - but they suggested we do it because it was the only way they could let him run. They wanted to see if there was something there. So they did the nerve block, found nothing and let him run. I read afterwards that we had done the nerve block, but we never do - we were led by the Racing Victoria vets."

Among the new requirements is for horses to undergo nuclear scintigraphy, a form of bone scan that O'Brien feels is excessive.

"You have to inject this nuclear dye into them and a person can't go into them for four days - and they are meant to race after that?" he poses rhetorically. "Obviously it's unfortunate what happened to our horse, but they must be under huge pressure from the 'antis' or whoever to demand that sort of thing."

Given that the European horses have been widely credited for saving the Melbourne Cup from irrelevance nearly 30 years ago, such prohibitive measures will surely damage it now?

"They see that," he maintains. "The race won't

RYAN SHOULD HAVE GOT A WEEK FOR CARELESS AND SHANE SHOULD HAVE GOT A MONTH FOR DANGEROUS'

be as competitive, but they might be happy with it that way. It's their race. They're entitled to do what they want, because we are only guests down there."

IT ISN'T just the Australian authorities that dismay O'Brien. The IHRB's ongoing reluctance to address the interference rules here is an old bugbear. Of course, he has first-hand knowledge of the horror of seeing his daughter Ana seriously injured in a fall during a racing incident, so maybe that experience informs his views.

When the discussion turns to Mother Earth's run in the Matron Stakes at Leopardstown, where her run was impeded when No Speak Alexander was switched left by Shane Foley, O'Brien gets pugnacious. No Speak Alexander kept the race, while Foley, knowing how far the boundaries can be pushed before a disqualification is triggered, received a five-day careless riding ban for a manoeuvre that has been described by some as a professional foul.

"It shouldn't have happened," O'Brien asserts. "There aren't many countries in the world where you could get away with that and not get a month's ban, because, to me, that is dangerous riding. If the jockeys are allowed to do those things and are not given severe penalties, it will keep happening."

Hang on, an hour later Ryan Moore let St Mark's Basilica drift right across the Leopardstown track without any attempt to straighten him, impeding Tarnawa every step of the way. There isn't anyone better at riding on the edge of the law. If Foley is wrong, surely Moore is too?

"Absolutely. Ryan should have got a week for careless and Shane should have got a month for dangerous - it's not rocket science," O'Brien responds.

"Ryan should have corrected his horse and not let him drift, but pulling a horse [No Speak Alexander] in like that is madness, and then letting it go is wrong. It's not the horse's fault, it's not the owner's fault or the trainer's fault, so they shouldn't be penalised. It's the jockey's fault, so they have to get big bans and fines, which happens in other countries like France and Dubai."

"It's worse in Ireland than anywhere else and it's letting Irish racing down. We had the whole world watching Leopardstown and it puts people off backing horses or following racing."

"And I'm not just talking about the big days, I'm talking about every day. You have to be consistent."

This is something that has been rumbling along for years though, and the Irish Champion Stakes wasn't the first time Ballydoyle benefited from lenient rules or interpretation thereof.

Nonetheless, O'Brien says the IHRB, whose long-serving chief executive Denis Egan retired this week to be replaced by its head of legal and licensing Cliodhna Guy on an interim basis, must address it.

"The authorities have to be strong on this - we're not in the Stone Age anymore," he reiterates. "It beggars belief. The rest of the world is moving on and we have to move with it. Jockeys here are the best in the world, so they will adapt quickly once they see that you can't get away with it."

"It's up to whoever is in these positions of authority - they have to step up to the mark. It can't be open season when jockeys are riding here."

The conversation eventually meanders back around to the Arc. In many ways, it has been an exceptional season for the 23-time champion trainer. He has farmed a mammoth 17 Group/Grade 1s and finally claimed a landmark Prix du Jockey Club with St Mark's Basilica, who emerged as one of the stars of the Classic generation before being retired this week.

HOWEVER, in plundering the French equivalents of the Derby and 2,000 Guineas, his slightly unconventional route was reflective of the way in which O'Brien was more imaginative in his planning.

Santa Barbara, who was fatally injured last week, and Bolshoi Ballet, Ballydoyle's leading candidates going into the Epsom Classics, secured three American Grade 1s as Snowfall and Mother Earth emerged from the pack to excel closer to home.

The two-year-olds were hit-and-miss for the summer, but then last weekend's triumphs for Tenebris, Luxembourg and Concert Hall flipped all that. Once again, O'Brien's fingerprints are all over the 2022 Classic markets.

"It has been a funny year, strange things are happening in different departments, but that's just the way it is - there are no two years ever the same," he muses.

"I know we have missed plenty, but we've also won races we might not have won in other years. There was some little blip with the juveniles for a couple of months that we couldn't put our finger on."

"All the bloods and scopes were fine, and they were in form, but they just weren't winning, so we had to back off them because we didn't know what was wrong. When I pulled back, they started to bloom again, and we've had ten or 12 two-year-old winners recently, so they've started to fire again now."

Given his travails a year ago, it could prove a timely resurgence.

O'Brien heads back to France today with Snowfall, Love and Broome bidding to add to his previous Arc triumphs with Dylan Thomas (2007) and Found (2016), and a deficit of €1.3 million to Andre Fabre in the trainers' championship would vanish were things to fall his way in the €5m showpiece. No Irish or British trainer has ever won the French title, while he trails Andrew Balding by around £900,000 in the British championship and is well clear of Joseph in Ireland's title race.

Splitting the vote might make winning three titles unlikely, but it illustrates just how much he has salvaged from a mixed bag.

"We're not far away in the prize-money anywhere, so we're in the hunt and we'll see what happens. Those sort of things don't really come into our thinking," he says.

A third Arc, though, would surely be sweet.

"It's a race everyone wants to win. It's the championship test of those horses in the autumn. It's in a great place on a great track, and it has all of the mystique that goes with it," he asserts.

"What they have done with Paris Longchamp is beautiful, and it has serious prize-money, which is the main thing. Everyone wants to be in Paris on this weekend."

This time, O'Brien will be back there. Chances are he'll make his presence felt.

INTERVIEW GORDON ELLIOTT

The trainer talks to Ireland editor Richard Forristal upon his return to the sport



ON THURSDAY, six months after being ignominiously thrust into exile, Gordon Elliott will step out of the shadows and begin his redemptive journey when he makes the first entries of his second coming.

It's a minor, administrative chore in a tectonic quest for atonement, one that will yield comeback runners at low-key fixtures at Punchestown or Sligo next week. He would prefer to clock in and out with the tedium of a shift worker but will not be granted that amnesty.

Elliott's fall from grace was a very public affair, so his return will be played out on similar terms. Some will doubtless view his revival as an affront. The outraged reaction to the emergence in February of a picture of the trainer sitting astride a dead horse, which sparked a whirlwind week that seemed to shake the very foundations of the sport, was unprecedented.

In handing down a 12-month suspension – with six suspended – for bringing racing into disrepute, the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board struck a reasonable balance between punishment and compassion. Nonetheless, Elliott's return, which coincides with an increase in racecourse crowds, is sure to stir up emotions once more.

"It's something I have given a lot of thought to," says the 43-year-old from across the table in the kitchen of his converted home at Cullentra House in County Meath. "How am I going to be received when I go back racing? Going racing is something I've always loved doing. I probably go racing more than most trainers because I'm a people person."

"I suppose I just hope people will forgive me and let me move forward by going back to doing what I think I do best, training winners."

In sitting on Morgan, who had collapsed and died on the gallops in 2019, one of horseracing's most recognisable figures undermined the central ballast of the sport's justification.

Elliott's indiscretion betrayed our insistence that thoroughbreds are privy to regal lifestyles and afforded similar dignity when they die in our service. That fracture in trust was exacerbated when images were circulated on social media days later of the amateur rider Rob James involved in a similarly mindless manoeuvre five years ago. It was the picture of Elliott, though, that scandalised.

Here was a Gold Cup and Grand National-winning trainer, who had single-handedly threatened the dominance of Willie Mullins' empire, involved in a crass, juvenile incident. As much as anything, it suggested an abject failure on his behalf to grasp the responsibility that comes with such success.

"It's true," he admits when that point is put to him. "I don't think I realised the impact that something I would do could have. You pick up a

'I'm sorry for what I did. A chance to move on is all I'm after'

paper and see a famous soccer player or whoever, and I don't think I thought of myself in that way.

"But then you look at what happened, you find yourself in nearly every paper across the world for the wrong reasons, it makes you realise the position I'm in. From now on, I have to prove that the impression people have of me from the picture does not reflect who I am."

"For myself, for my family, for my staff and, most of all, for the industry and its supporters, I need to step up and prove to everyone that I am not a monster."

Was it the only time he had sat on a dead horse?

"Yes – defin-i-ghtly," he volleys with that trademark emphasis on the second 'i'.

Elliott's tone comes across as genuinely repentant and his characteristically gruff demeanour is disarming and convincing. As the son of a panel-beater and housewife from nearby Summerhill, he has never allowed himself to acquire notions of grandeur, despite his wealth.

But his 'work hard play hard' ethos is well established. While there was always something endearing about his resistance to conform, that live-for-the-moment outlook was turned on him as evidence of a lack of maturity when the picture saga kicked off.

How did he end up in a situation where it was deemed acceptable to sit

on a dead animal, and what does that say about the culture at the yard? The incriminating photo was taken by his head lad Simon McGonagle, who is also one of his oldest friends and was hit with an effective two-month suspension for taking and disseminating the picture on Snapchat in 2019.

"That's the sort of thing I have had to reflect on," says Elliott. "But what happened was a moment of madness, and if I hadn't sat on the horse, there wouldn't have been a picture for Simon to take in the first place, so the first mistake was mine. We've been friends since we were 12 or 13 years of age and we both have to live with what happened, but we were always going to stand by each other."

"Everyone knows we all celebrate our good days, because we have to work to get them. I've always worked hard to get the owners I have, and you

When Envoi Allen was here, there wasn't a night I didn't lie in bed thinking about him. And now that he's gone, there still isn't a night I don't lie in bed thinking about him,

don't get them by sitting at home. We are in the entertainment business, and having a meal or a drink with an owner is usually how I meet my new owners. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, so I have to go out and attract owners."

"Now, since this all happened, I've had to look at every aspect of my life, and it's certainly changed because I'm now more aware of what is expected of me, but I'll continue to work to attract new owners because I want to get back to where we were before all this."

"I had worked very hard to source those horses, and then they were gone. Just like that."

"When Envoi Allen was here, there wasn't a night I didn't lie in bed thinking about him. And now that he's gone, there still isn't a night I don't lie in bed thinking about him, but I have never had a cross word with any of the owners who left. I still speak to them all and the gate is always open. I understand completely why they had to go."

"Having said that, I still have a brilliant bunch of owners here who have stuck by me and want to support me and want to see me get back to where I was."

If Elliott's summer store acquisitions are anything to go by, many of those owners are in it for the long haul. At Goffs' Land Rover Sale, a raft of the most expensive lots were

£400,000 apiece, and they joined Elliott's closest rivals on a free transfer. They weren't just horses, they were dreams going up in a puff of smoke.

"That was the lowest point throughout it all," he concedes.

With the Cheltenham Festival two weeks away, did he fear the damage would be ruinous?

"I didn't know what was going to happen, or where it was all going to end up," he says. "If you were listening to just a tenth of what people were telling you . . . like, some people wanted me banned for life."

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Envoi Allen and Sir Gerhard cost



PATRICK McCANN (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS)

Gordon Elliott pictured with Tiger Roll last week

knocked down to patrons like Noel and Valerie Moran's Bective Stud and Andrew and Gemma Brown.

The Morans' €230,000 Shantou top lot is housed at Cullentra, while four six-figure acquisitions bound for Elliott had an aggregate cost of €800,000.

At Tattersalls Ireland's Derby Sale, the Morans also secured the top lot in the shape of a €280,000 son of Walk In The Park, as they did at Tattersalls' Cheltenham Sale in April by paying €220,000 for the highly regarded point-to-point winner Au Fleuron.

While Michael O'Leary's Gigginstown House Stud, the cornerstone of Elliott's ascent, is no longer in the market for new blood, he is hardly short of fresh investment.

Still, before all that trade materialised, the Cheltenham Festival came and went without him.

By then, Denise Foster had been drafted in to take over at Cullentra. For Elliott, those four days at Cheltenham did not make for an easy watch. Sir Gerhard, Quilixios and Galvin all won for different stables. Foster returned with three wins, including Tiger Roll's bombastic return to form in the cross-country.

That was a particular testament to Elliott, who reinvigorated an 11-year-old who had looked gone at the game before his historic fifth festival success. The modestly bought, pint-sized dual Grand National hero is a totem of Elliott's acumen, yet many

were happy to write him out of history that week.

"It was hard and that sort of thing did hurt," he acknowledges.

"Cheltenham is a place I target horses at – I just love having winners there. If I'd been training, we'd have won the trainers' award, so it was

heartbreaking, especially for all the lads and girls in the yard having to watch the horses they had devoted their lives to winning for other yards.

"As hard as it was for me, it was great that Denise had the winners she did. She has been a wonderful influence here and I'm extremely grateful for the way she stepped in. So for morale in the yard, those winners did help, because the staff kept the whole thing going while I was on the floor. I was still all over the place at the time, although I was starting to realise what support I had."

He elaborates: "When Quilixios won the Triumph Hurdle, Henry de

I don't know who put it out there, and I had never seen the picture before it went online... I do feel it was malicious'

Bromhead rang me to say, 'Well done,' and he made a point of acknowledging me on television, which was decent of him. And Sir Gerhard hadn't crossed the line in the Champion Bumper when I got a text from Willie Mullins.

"As much as it is so competitive here in Ireland, we all have each other's backs, and I guess through things like that you find out a bit more about who your real friends are. Others had their own agendas, and everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I was disappointed with some people. I shouldn't have done what I did – I will never shy away from that but I'm a human being who made a mistake."

WHEN the picture emerged, rumours abounded as to its origins. Elliott insists he doesn't know who put it into the public domain, but he does believe it was an orchestrated attempt to damage him.

"I don't know who put it out there, and I had never seen the picture before it went online," he says. "When you look at how it turned up just before Cheltenham, so long after it was taken, I do feel it was malicious."

"There were other incidents here that happened in the weeks beforehand, and there were rumours about things that were supposed to have happened here that didn't, so it

felt like someone was out to get me."

On the day that the Cheveley Park horses departed, Elliott's friends, recognising his fragile state, reached out to the IHRB senior medical officer Dr Jennifer Pugh.

"They put me into a car and drove me to her," he recalls. "At that stage, I didn't know where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do, but Jennifer made me look at things a bit differently, helped me to see that I'd be okay, no matter how bad things got."

"She was brilliant, to be honest. She came down to the yard three or four times as well and spoke to the staff individually and collectively."

"I went to bed that night, after seeing Jennifer the first time, thinking to myself, 'Right. All of my staff are sticking by me, so I need to stick by them, and get strong for them.' I promised them that, if they stuck with me, I'd stand by them, and not one member of staff has left. I really couldn't say enough about how good they have been throughout all of this."

In upholding their side of the bargain, Elliott's office staff dealt with the brunt of the anger, fielding X-rated calls and emails. He gives Alex Hutter and Pip Proctor special credit for having to deal with the bombardment and ensuring that all of the supportive correspondence received a response.

And there were, he says, a multitude of reassuring voices. Elliott, who sponsors his local Summerhill senior football team as well as the training gear for the County Meath minor camogie team, reveals he did not set foot in his local village for months, such was his shame. But while he didn't venture out, the village came to him.

"I felt I had let the whole village down," he muses. "My family are all very normal people, and every time they turned on the news, there was me. That was hard for them, because there were worse things happening in the world."

"But the amount of support I received was comforting. Every member of the senior football team here sent me a card, and you wouldn't believe the amount of people from other sports and sectors all over the world who went out of their way to get in touch."

One unexpected source of succour came from Sir Alex Ferguson, who reached out on the Tuesday of Cheltenham. By then, Elliott had watched Black Tears win for Foster and Galvin score for Ian Ferguson, so the full extent of his suspension was starting to crystallise.

The Manchester United icon likened the thirst for a scalp Elliott encountered to the outrage that descended when Eric Cantona launched himself into the Selhurst Park crowd to kick a Crystal Palace fan in 1995. Ferguson reminded Elliott that some things are worth fighting for, and for him to ignore the noise and concentrate on working towards rebuilding his career.

"That's all I can focus on now," concludes Elliott. "I know all this has set me back, but I have proved I can train horses at every level, and it's all I want to do. I made a mistake, I understand that, and I am sorry for what I did. A chance to move on is all I'm after now."

He will get that chance, and don't bet against him making the most of it. As Sir Alex might say, he has never played for a draw in his life.

Panorama issues 'a big worry for the sport'

IN JULY, Elliott was thrust back into the limelight when three horses he had previously trained featured in Panorama's controversial episode entitled The Dark Side of Horse Racing.

He is reluctant to discuss the particulars of the broadcast because he says he is taking legal advice on a complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Commission. One of the horses, Vyta Du Roc, had been gifted to a member of Elliott's staff, but was then rehomed again to a yard in England before eventually turning up in Drury & Sons' abattoir.

Elliott says he no longer deals with the unidentified trader who featured in Panorama, and that he had already changed how such issues are dealt with at Cullentra.

"For the past few years we have stamped the passport of every horse that comes into the yard to say they are not fit for human consumption," he says, before randomly pulling passports from his office shelf to prove the point.

Elliott accepts that the picture controversy likely increased the currency of the abattoir footage that had been shot some years previously, but any suggestion that horses in his care do not benefit from the highest welfare standards rankles with him.

That reality is evident all over the yard, but also in his significant and frequent charitable donations. At different removes during the summer, for example, the Leinster Horse and Pony Rescue group's Facebook page thanked him for transporting horses to foster homes and clearing a veterinary bill that ran to €2,000.

That all said, Elliott agrees that the issue of what happens to horses when they are no longer fit for racing is something the industry urgently needs to address.

"For me, it's a big worry for the sport," he says. "Like, we have rehomed around 50 horses here in the last three years, and to the best of our ability, with the help of the girls in the office, we keep track of where they are and who has them."

"But if a horse is gone out of my yard for a long period of time, and someone's circumstances change and they move the horse on, it's very hard to keep track of what's happening, yet I will always be registered as its last trainer."

"I feel there should be a form to fill in and a tax on each transaction, then the traceability will be there. That's the key to this. I am now very nervous about rehoming horses, and for those that we have rehomed recently we ask for quarterly reports and pictures so we can avoid a repeat of what happened."

"But this is something the authorities in Ireland and Britain need to take control of and give us a clear system and structure that we can work with to ensure full traceability."

THE COMMENT PAGE

British racing's problems deep-rooted and systemic yet BHA shows little urgency

AS EXPECTED, the twin obstacles of Brexit and Covid-19 prompted reduced Irish participation at last week's Cheltenham Festival, yet the travelling delegation still obliterated the home team and there are some illuminating take-outs among the statistics.

Total Irish runners fell from 181 in 2020 to 162, which, in the circumstances, equates to a modest ten per cent reduction. More predictably, the number of different trainers represented fell markedly, down 38 per cent from 37 to 23.

As we saw, the reduction in overall volume was of little significance, and you only have to go back to 2018, when there were 150 representatives from these shores, for a lower number.

What is far more alarming is the collapse in the number of British runners from 292 in 2020 to 239 last week, an 18 per cent contraction. It is a figure unparalleled in recent times.

Even if you go back to 1993, with the festival just three days and made up of 20 races with some notably small fields, there were still 252 British runners. In that context, last week's fall in participation levels is mindboggling.

Despite the number of Irish runners dropping, they actually ended up with a greater proportion of participants than ever before, with the percentage topping 40 per cent for a first time, having been less than 38 per cent last year. Their win percentage soared to 14 per cent, the highest in recent years and up from nine per cent last year.

Of course, it's not just a numbers game, but, when you factor in the extent to which Irish minds were concentrated so keenly this year about which horses to send, there are intriguing statistics.

Paul Nolan is a fine example of just how discerning Irish trainers were. He elected not to travel Latest

RICHARD FORRISTAL
Ireland editor



Exhibition, partly due to the cost and hassle involved in taking on Monkfish again. Nolan's Prestbury Park team ultimately consisted of a solitary runner, Mrs Milner, who dotted up in the Pertemps.

In the end, ten Irish trainers saddled winners, which is a joint record that has been achieved only once before. At two of the previous three festivals, despite yields of 17 on both occasions, just four Irish trainers were on the scoresheet.

Through that prism, what unfolded last week was clearly a resounding triumph for the industry in Ireland. Such dominance has been years in the making, and all the signs were there in the markets beforehand that the magic number of 20 was eminently achievable.

That success is built on a bedrock of passion for and understanding of the thoroughbred, two qualities not exclusive to Ireland. However, combined with government support – which cannot be taken for granted – and the structures implemented by HRI, which are not beyond rebuke but turn on healthy prize-money levels and a competitive race programme, the gene pool of human talent has been harnessed

If you were to sum up the fundamental policy of British racing, it is organised to promote betting'

and been given a platform to flourish.

The opposite is basically true in Britain, which has persistently lost ground in the highest echelon. Consider this. In 2013, British horses accounted for nearly 77 per cent of the festival runners, yet it was the Irish horses who held sway for a first time, taking 14 of the 27 races. Ever since, the graph of British runners has steadily declined, dropping below 60 per cent this year and constituting just 61 per cent in the previous two years.

LIKEWISE, the share of winners has similarly collapsed, with the onset of the four-day festival in 2005 a watershed moment. In essence, the harsh reality is that the more chances that have been created for success at Cheltenham, the fewer the British are winning, or even challenging for.

That is clearly a shocking indictment of the way the sport is structured in Britain.

If you were to sum up the fundamental policy of British racing, it is organised to promote betting and fund the levy. That means as many fixtures and races as can be accommodated and populated, otherwise known as a race to the bottom or putting the cart before the horse.

The Irish programme, which nobody is suggesting is perfect, turns on catering for the existing horses-in-training population, a stated ambition to promote quality and a centralised fixture list. It's not

a whole lot more complicated than that, and the suggestion the thriving Irish point-to-point scene gives the locals exclusive access to the best produce is an absolute red herring.

British trainers have always found ways to identify and source the cream of the talent. The difference now is that the owners with the financial muscle to acquire that talent choose to keep the horses in Ireland, which is something you would think might exercise the BHA a little more than it has done.

On Tuesday, four days after its stakeholders were humbled on home soil, the regulator finally made a public utterance. It was certainly no rallying cry, instead a rather prosaic contribution that referenced long-term objectives and pointed to the difficulties posed by the pandemic as requiring urgent attention.

That is all well and good, but this is already a long-term, deep-rooted and systemic problem for its industry. In short, it will still be there long after the pandemic if it doesn't give those willing to invest in the industry more bang for their buck.

The statement also lacked the teeth and urgency of the BHA's pre-Cheltenham intervention that saw it compromise another jurisdiction's regulatory matter by rushing to announce that entries for Gordon Elliott horses would not be accepted until the IHRB had dealt with the picture of the trainer sitting on the deceased Morgan.

The IHRB had pledged to address the scandal promptly, and at the time Elliott had no entries ahead of Cheltenham, yet the BHA unilaterally and arbitrarily moved to condemn the trainer without due process, undermining the IHRB by forcing its hand.

In the days after Cheltenham, when the BHA went so noticeably quiet, the notion occurred that it's usually a good idea to make sure your own house is in order before you save the world. Just a thought.

Email editor@racingpost.com

Letters to the editor

Irish quality recognised in the way their horses move

THE Cheltenham Festival was absolutely fabulous and heartfelt congratulations to the superb Irish trainers.

About 15 years ago at one of our many festival visits, my daughter and I carefully studied the way horses moved in the paddock. The Willie Mullins-trained horses were the most consistently correct in all their paces.

Now watching on television, Ireland

has another trainer ambassador in the guise of Henry de Bromhead, whose horses moved so fluently on the track, culminating in the regal victory of Honeysuckle in the Champion Hurdle.

The other reason for the excellence of Irish racing is the superb quality of horsemanship of their jockeys. It is a joy to watch horse and rider in perfect harmony and the emergence of a certain Rachael Blackmore.

Ann Bish
Wimborne, Dorset

Better luck on the Tuesday

I QUITE agree with Rupert King in his letter (March 21) regarding his disappointment in moving the Grand Annual from the Friday to the Wednesday at last week's Cheltenham Festival.

However, unlike Rupert I would not have kept it on the Friday. Instead I would have returned it to the final race on the Tuesday, which was last the case back in 1992.

In seven runnings of the race

between 1986 and 1992, I backed the winner four times: namely Pearlyman, French Union, Pukka Major and My Young Man.

Of the other three runnings, I also tipped the 1988 winner Vodkatini (unbacked), while of my two losing selections only one was backed, Ebony Star, who fell when in contention in 1991.

I have not backed the winner since!

David Roberts
Oswestry, Shropshire

ALAN SWEETMAN
Another view



So much fun despite the beaten jollies

LAST week's Cheltenham Festival provided a welter of statistics to illustrate Irish supremacy. The facts and figures associated with 23 training successes and 20 Irish-bred winners provided the statistical framework to a host of wonderfully engaging stories which caught the imagination of the racing public at a fixture run in unprecedented circumstances, and with the shadow of adverse publicity looming in the background.

Oddly enough, it is a negative statistic that illustrates better than anything else the sheer depth of the Irish influence: Irish trainers were responsible for 17 of the 20 beaten favourites at the meeting.

Consider how a similar scenario would have played out at festivals gone by. Imagine the battered pride of Irish trainers, accompanied by the doom and gloom of Irish punters. Carnage in the ring, catastrophe, calamity, themes familiar to those of us old enough to recall a period around the late 1980s when Irish winners were thin on the ground.

Willie Mullins, leading trainer at the meeting while comprehensively eclipsed by Henry de Bromhead in the showpiece races, supplied nine beaten favourites. He won three of those races with longer-priced but well-supported runners in Colreevy, Sir Gerhard and Galopin Des Champs. And in all but the St James's Place Hunters' Chase, another Irish horse picked up the pieces.

In real-life terms the communal aspect was almost entirely missing – no punters at the track, Ireland's betting shops closed, no gatherings in pubs, workplaces or homes.

And yet I'm sure my own experience of a week enlivened by the never-ending WhatsApp conversations, the texts and the phone calls, was replicated up and down the country.

As winner after winner flowed, we celebrated every success and drank in every nuance. Highlights abounded. Personal favourites included Richie Condon's unconfined joy on 33-1 chance Heaven Help Us for greyhound maestro Paul Hennessy, the spirit of camaraderie exemplified by Jonathan Moore and Danny Mullins in the Flooring Porter story, and Jordan Gainford's ride on bonus winner The Shunter.

I could choose half a dozen more. From Noel Meade's 80-1 win with Jeff Kidder to Monkfish at 1-4, there was so much to celebrate at a unique and remarkable festival at which Rachael Blackmore and De Bromhead took pride of place in their own self-effacing way.