



*Mondays* with DAVID ALLAN



*From the starting stalls in the straight, one and a bit times round the expanses of the Knavesmire at York.*

## Staying the course — and saving the breed

ON 7<sup>th</sup> May this year, this column asked [“What’s a Proper Horse?”](#) extolling the virtues of mile and a halfers. As in *“Yeah, Frankel was good but he never did it at a mile and a half”* – a grudging acknowledgement of that supreme athlete, often uttered by fans of Sea the Stars.

But let’s go a couple of furlongs farther. Or four furlongs farther. Or even eight furlongs farther (than Sea the Stars, Galileo, Nashwan and all those greats).

When we do that, we hit upon some of the most popular heroes of British Racing and we wonder if they are an endangered species.

Well, we can wonder all we like, but the BHA wondered and did something about it. In 2016, strongly supported by the TBA, the BHA bemoaned the shift over the past 20 years in commercial breeding to speed, including cheap speed and all that this expression conveys.

I give you colts retiring at 2 having won a Group 2 to go to stud and cover 150 so-so mares. Cash cows with the flimsiest of qualifications contributing to the biggest problem now facing Ireland and UK

(again): overproduction.

Not only has the effect been detrimental to the breed (at the very least in the sense of narrowing the field of vision of commercial breeders), but the impact is also on the paying public who love to see their staying favourites coming back time and again.

In fact it is the paying public’s field of vision – literally – that is also being narrowed. One reason that so many people love jump racing is that the races last longer. The nearest “the Flat” can get to that situation is a riveting 2 mile journey twice round a small track or utilising every inch of a major one.

At Group 1 level, The Ascot Gold Cup is still “it” for so many racing fans, just as the Grand National over 4 miles and 30 fences is “it” for half the country – and that is only a Group 3, about **(to p2)**



*Double Trigger and Jason Weaver stretching for home.*

### **DAVID ALLAN (cont..)**

which the public does not care much when it comes to spectacle and stars, equine and human.

There is nothing – for many – like the hard fought finish of a staying race, demonstrating courage and durability before your very eyes. When The Queen won the Ascot Gold Cup in 2013 with Estimate, the massive Thursday crowd went bananas. Not only because of "Hats Off for a Royal Victory" (we still take our hats off when there is one wherever it is), but also because HMQ won a race so loaded with history that you could take a degree in it and because it is a hell of a contest over 2.5 miles (4,000 metres) round Ascot with its stiff finish.

Estimate "only" won it once. In modern times, the people's hero was Yeats. He won it four times (2006-9). Acquiring the status of a Desert Orchid or Kauto Star, the Sadler's Wells horse often raised the roof.

He won the Goodwood Cup twice, but not the Doncaster Cup which is the third leg of the "Triple Crown" of races for stayers. When he eventually retired (entire) he stood at Coolmore's main Fethard establishment more out of deference to his glorious successes than his likely patronage with top class mares, and soon moved to National Hunt division.

Probably the most popular stayer in modern times was Persian Punch. He won 20 races (13 Group but not Group 1, 1996-2003) including three Jockey Club Cups, a Doncaster Cup, two Goodwood Cups, three Henry II Stakes, and two Lonsdale Cups. He was pipped for that "Triple Crown" by being 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Ascot Gold Cup. A handsome chestnut, Persian Punch had his own website (back then) and an enormous formal fan club.



*Persian Punch ,commemorated on course at Newmarket.*

He captured the public's imagination in the same way as a Desert Orchid who was his stablemate. Dual purpose trainer David Elsworth had them both. They overlapped only in the sense that in Persian Punch's day, "Dessie" had retired but was still in the yard leading the 2 year olds out every morning until going out to grass in the summer.

More recently, retired footballer Michael Owen's ill-fated Brown Panther and the Duke of Marmalade horse Big Orange have been hugely popular amongst racegoers – the latter stopping the traffic in Newmarket when the word got round last winter that the horsewalks were frozen and Michael Bell's string, including the popular stayer, would be going over to racecourse side via the High Street.

Neither of those two reached the heights of Yeats or Persian Punch – and one other staying hero to mention: Double Trigger. In a career spanning four seasons, he did win a Triple Crown (Stayers) and a lot else besides, usually 2 miles or more, usually with Jason Weaver on board running always from the



*Without the 2.5 miles of the Ascot Gold Cup, the racing public would have been denied the extraordinary Yeats.*

### DAVID ALLAN (cont..)

front, big white blaze to the fore, and always trained by Mark Johnston.

Not every stayer can win at that level. One of our most popular Hintlesham Racing runners was a 3 and 4 year old Selkirk filly whose best win was a 2 mile handicap at Sandown. Wow did our team go nuts as she stretched up the hill, nerves shredded for more than double the time of a commonplace mile race.

The BHA, oh-so-rightly wanting to spend a decade or so boosting 14-16 furlong racing (2800-3200 metres) launched a long-term project to revitalise the programme for the staying horse – an essential and important element of racing’s heritage. The BHA Development Fund allocated an investment of £1,894,500 (I am sure there must be a reason for

such precision) which is in the region of R36 million to enhance races aimed at middle and long distance runners.

Owners, trainers and breeders applauded. The result is quite dramatic.

For 2018-2020 the programme now includes 2 year old Maidens and Novices for the progeny of sires or dams who won over at least 2000 metres, along with an increase in 2 year old races over 2,000 metres irrespective of parentage.

There are eight new Class 2 2,800 metres 3 year old handicaps, some with six figure prize money. There is a fresh programme of 2,400 metres maidens and novices for 3yo+ with decent money – 20% of the races for fillies only - and a programme of 2,600 metres or more fillies only handicaps worth £40k now and £50k by 2020.

The Goodwood Cup is Group 1, elevated, while the 2,800 metres Brontë Cup for older fillies and mares at York is now Group 3. The list of other staying upgrades is substantial.

This is a serious project! Overall average prize money for 2,200 – 2,800 metres now exceeds the rewards for any other distance.

For the sporting (and patient) racehorse owner who knows what he or she is doing, the opportunity to buy a lovely prospective stayer is a good opportunity because the press of purchasing is towards something that will run (or people think will run) “tomorrow”. With the rewards for staying improving, we might actually see a shift when this project takes more widely understood effect. - **tt.**



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davidallan@allanbloodlines.com | Mobile: +27 (0)72 740 9061 | Whatsapp: +44 (0)7774 697640  
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