

RACING POST

# HORSERACING

## *Miscellany*



*Marvellous, Miscellaneous  
Moments from 400 Years of  
Horseracing History*

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# Contents

Introduction	5
Horseracing in the pandemic	6
Racing Characters	10
Quickfire Celebs Section	43
Racing Chat and Quirky Quotes	45
The Name Game	52
Racing Down the Years	55
AlphaBetical	134
Dodgy Dealing	139
Vintage Racing Glossary	147
Nicknames	149
Did You Know?	152
The Queen's Majestic Racing Life	155
Bibliography	159

# Introduction

I have been racing in many parts of the world since, as barely – if at all – a teenager, I first sat on Glorious Goodwood's Trundle Hill to watch the racing action happening below, for free, back in the early 1960s.

As I began to become a regular racegoer, it didn't take me long to realise that there is virtually always something to be seen or heard for the first time, wherever and whenever I attend.

Working in and around racing for almost half a century, and visiting many tracks abroad in Europe and beyond, I collected and stored racecourse stories galore, many of them personally experienced.

In Switzerland it was the heroic male figure stepping confidently out on to the racecourse, arms aloft, to capture a runner that had shed its jockey and was running free. The unimpressed horse just galloped straight over macho man, to the delight of the crowd.

In Germany, at Baden-Baden's Iffezheim course, where they have raced since 1858, I saw Elvis Presley acting as the starter. In Guernsey at the island's L'Ancrese course (a golf course every other day of the year), the starter used a set of kitchen steps as his rostrum.

In Australia, at Flemington, I witnessed the Japanese owners of the Melbourne Cup winner, taking their trophy away on a local train, surrounded by tipsy Aussie racegoers (there didn't seem to be any other type!).

In Sweden a race horse gave me an each-way tip, which profitably finished second at 12-1.

Such quirky occurrences are a great part of horseracing. Every racegoer has experienced something out of the ordinary – a humorous, unexpected, outrageous, hilarious, amazing, baffling, bizarre incident – and hundreds of them appear in the pages of this small but perfectly formed volume of miscellaneous turf tales and racecourse romps, for your equine edification and entertainment.

Graham Sharpe  
Racegoer, punter and author

# Horseracing in the pandemic

The Grand National – together with the rest of the Aintree meeting – was called off on 16 March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

\* \* \*

The Cheltenham Festival, which had just finished, had completed all four days of the meeting, with bumper crowds – albeit slightly below the previous year’s turnout.

‘In some ways, I would say that this has been a wonderful distraction before we face the reality of what the next month or so may have in store for us. It’s been a great four days’ racing and a wonderful release for an awful lot of people,’ said Cheltenham chief Ian Renton, summing up the 2020 festival, which faced widespread criticism for taking place while almost all other major sporting fixtures were being postponed or cancelled as the threat of coronavirus kicked in.

‘There has been an overriding sense of the band continuing to play as the *Titanic* goes down about this year’s festival,’ wrote Marcus Armytage of the *Daily Telegraph*, nailing the bizarre atmosphere of Cheltenham in 2020, while Greg Wood of *The Guardian* wasn’t disagreeing, ‘Racing tends to live in its own little world at the best of times – for many that is part of the attraction – but the sense of deliberate detachment can never have felt so strong.’

‘Many of those breezing into Cheltenham this week may have thought they were tapping into a form of Dunkirk spirit, but the sceptics would deem *dummkopf* a more fitting term and wonder if any celebration of horses, alcohol and gambling was worth this risk,’ wrote *The Times*’s Rick Broadbent on 14 March, seeming to sit on the fence in wondering whether Cheltenham should have taken place.

‘If Cheltenham was being held in Ireland I don’t think it would be on, quite frankly,’ *The Times* quoted Ireland’s minister for foreign affairs, Simon Coveney, that same day.

Eight days earlier, a public health notice posted on the British Horseracing Authority’s website had implored people, ‘Do not travel to the festival if you have any of the following symptoms – a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath AND you have been to, or transited through the high-risk countries, or been in contact with anyone that has in the last 14 days.’

\* \* \*

Paddy Power announced they would be closing all their betting shops in Britain from Friday, 20 March until the end of April as the UK government confirmed it had asked a range of businesses such as cafes, pubs and restaurants to close as a result of the pandemic.

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Opening the ITV4 coverage of Irish racing from Thurles in County Tipperary on Saturday, 21 March, presenter Ed Chamberlin told viewers, 'Sport is trivial at a time when the world is a grim place, but we want today's live racing to offer those who are suffering a small tonic.'

Then, as the show closed after showing five races, commentator Richard Hoiles hit just the right tone as he signed off, saying, 'By definition our audience is generally elderly ... if you're of that demographic, you're facing an extremely worrying time. A lot of you have supported racing right through since the initial ITV era. To be faced with the chance of going into seclusion for a long period of time – Brough [Scott] was saying he's not able to see his grandkids at the moment – it must be particularly difficult.'

'Loads [of elderly people] work at racecourses – I nod at car park attendants, and people who work in the weighing room. I don't know names.'

'Thank you for your support of the sport and hopefully if we can continue even in small measure just to give you some brief glimpse of normality, then hopefully it's just helping you out in what's a very difficult time.'

*Metro* newspaper racing correspondent Nick Metcalfe called the programme 'one of the most unusual sports broadcasts any of us can remember seeing on British television.'

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On Sunday, 22 March, six days before it was due to happen, the Dubai World Cup meeting at Meydan was called off on health grounds.

Trainer Charlie Fellowes questioned the timing of the cancellation, having sent his globetrotting yard favourite Prince Of Arran to the United Arab Emirates just two days earlier.

Fellowes had planned to run the seven-year-old in the Dubai Gold Cup after being given assurance that the meeting would take place behind closed doors.

'If we'd had an inkling that this was going to happen we wouldn't have sent the horse with the other Europeans on Friday.'

Quite why they left it this late to call it off I don't know, but the decision obviously transcends racing,' he said.

Golden Slipper won the Hong Kong Derby by a neck from outsider Playa Del Puente in a spectacular last-to-first finish on Sunday, 22 March at Sha Tin, where the meeting took place behind closed doors.

Respected leading jumps trainer Nicky Henderson said of how the crisis was affecting him and his counterparts, 'We've been a lucky generation, as we're the first that's not had to have a ghastly experience of a world war. We've been relatively crisis-free. We had the Falklands War, we had foot and mouth disease and we took all those seriously, but this far outweighs any of those.'

Kieren Fallon was a winner in the saddle but had to admit defeat when confronted with panic-buying at his local supermarket, reported David Milnes to *Racing Post* readers on 23 March.

The six-time champion jockey had tried to stock up after returning from a winter spell riding out in Dubai but was left stunned by what greeted him in the shopping aisles of West Suffolk.

The three-time Derby winner told Milnes, 'I was still on Dubai time, four hours ahead, when I got back so it was no problem to get up early and get over to Tesco in Bury St Edmunds around 7am. Everything appeared quiet, but before I knew it, people just appeared like locusts and there was nothing left that anyone wanted. I've never seen anything like it. It's certainly not like that in Dubai, so it was a bit of a shock to the system.

'I then tried a nearby Aldi on the way home but they were queuing out of the door at 7.30am. I managed to get some supplies in Newmarket Tesco on Saturday morning, but there was no pasta and baked beans were scarce.'

*Racing Post* editor Tom Kerr told readers on 25 March, 'It is with great sadness I must announce that following Thursday's edition the *Racing Post* will be temporarily suspending publication. Unfortunately, with racing in Britain and Ireland halted, betting shops closed, and our governments urging everyone to stay at home as much as possible to slow the spread of the coronavirus, we have been left with no other choice.

'Recent events have had an unfathomable impact on our world. We have seen harrowing pictures of overcrowded hospitals and overwhelmed medical professionals in other countries, and in Britain and Ireland we are bracing ourselves for similar scenes,

while hoping the extensive measures announced thus far will forestall them.

‘Sport and betting pale into insignificance when weighed against such terrible events, but we hope in these difficult last two weeks we have provided our readers with the information they need to understand what is happening, and some welcome distraction from the unrelenting news about Covid-19’s spread. In particular, I hope we have helped keep those employed in racing and facing difficult financial times ahead informed about the support available to them.’

Christophe Soumillon, one of the most successful and most travelled jockeys in the world for the past two decades, expressed horror at being allowed back into France, one of the worst-affected countries in Europe, without being tested for coronavirus.

The 38-year-old was quoted in a story dated 25 March as saying he had ‘more trouble at the bakery than at customs’ when he arrived at Paris’s Charles De Gaulle Airport as he returned from Dubai after the cancellation of the previous weekend’s Dubai World Cup meeting, according to horseracingplanet.com.

‘In the past month, I travelled a lot in Dubai, Hong Kong and Japan,’ he said in an interview with the *Super Moscato Show* on France’s RMC radio station. ‘Since the start of the epidemic, I have done several tests, all negative, so as not to bring the virus home.’

‘This Monday morning, arriving at customs, I was shocked. I did not undergo any control. I find it absurd. They did not take the temperature, and they asked me nothing, neither email address nor telephone number.’

Newly crowned champion jump jockey – the first time since 1995 that neither A.P. McCoy or Richard Johnson had won the title – Brian Hughes, 34, with 141 winners, was disappointed that the season had been cut short because of coronavirus, but commented, ‘There is a global crisis, and racing is not that important in the grand scheme of things.’

He was philosophical about racing having stopped, ‘God forbid if someone got seriously injured when the NHS is as stretched and busy as it is.’ He also stopped riding out, ‘You try and do your bit for the country by staying at home.’