

Gimcrack Speech by Julie Harrington

My President, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you, President for that kind and generous introduction.

To deliver a speech at this most celebrated of sporting occasions is a great honour. I only hope I can do justice to the history of this august event.

Let me begin by congratulating William Haggas and Tom Marquand and the team behind Lake Forest on a thrilling Gimcrack win in August. Congratulations also to the breeders Sahara Group Holdings and the owners - when Lake Forest won his race - Silver Racing. I'm sure the **new** owners Tony Bloom and Ian McAleavy are already looking forward to an exciting future ahead.

May I also take this opportunity to thank Mr Malih Al Basti for his generous sponsorship not just of the Gimcrack but also a significant number of races across Britain.

When Bridget and William asked if I would do this speech, I requested a brief, being unfamiliar with the genre. They helpfully pointed me in the direction of previous speeches and indicated that often the most-successful speeches were short.

In reviewing previous speeches, I was first gripped by imposter syndrome - given the illustrious cast-list from previous years - and second by the recurring themes.

Most speakers use the opportunity of addressing racing's great and good to do one of the following:

1. Deliver a 'love letter to the sport' - personal reflections on what racing has brought to their life
2. To celebrate the achievement of our horses & talented horsemen and women
3. To draw attention to the challenges ahead...or deliver a 'call to arms' to racing's leaders
4. Perhaps sometimes to court a bit of controversy and throw the odd grenade

Well tonight, and in line with Bridget's brief, I will attempt to keep it short while touching on those themes.

First, my love letter

As a proud Northerner, albeit from the wrong side of the Pennines, it is of course a huge honour to be giving this speech in the powerhouse of British racing that is Yorkshire.

Growing up in a working-class Manchester family, I was surrounded by the language of racing and betting from an early age.

Both my granddads, my dad and my seven uncles would abscond from most family occasions to the betting shop and return with tales that to my young ear were full of romance. Horses' names, exotic bets and battles with the bookies and each other.

It should have been no surprise to my parents that, when offered summer work during my A levels with the Walmsley Brothers bookmakers, that I jumped at the chance.

For the first time I stepped on a course, and instead of my uncle's tall tales, I was part of the story and got to meet some of the leading characters for myself.....I was hooked.

The 30 or so years since then, my journey to CEO of the BHA, can be divided equally between brewing, running racecourses, football & cycling. In fact, my family joke I've had my dad's dream career.

Racing however has been ever-present.

My time in brewing, at Tetleys and Whitbread, meant I saw racing from a sponsor's perspective. I spent a considerable part of my marketing budget at York and other courses.

Why? Because we are a sport that appeals across genders, without the tribal affiliations of other sports and with time between the action to do some business. Reasons that remain as relevant today as then.

When I made the jump from client to course, my 8 years running racecourses for Sir Stanley Clarke's Northern Racing was a brilliant introduction to the sport's administration and I learned a huge amount from Sir Stanley who is sadly no longer with us.

And during my time in other sports, I still mixed business with pleasure, using racing as the venue for team bonding trips, as a role model for other sports' integrity and antidoping operations and our jockeys as an example to those athletes using 'simulation' to cheat when our athletes would walk back with a broken collar bone.

Mainly though I was free to enjoy racing as a simple punter, away from the politics.

Next to celebrate our participants

I would like to take a moment to reflect on arguably the most important group within our sport – the stable staff – without whom we wouldn't have a sport.

Of course, every year we recognise them at the Godolphin-sponsored and BHA-run Thoroughbred Industry Employee Awards. And I want to extend once more, huge thanks to William and the team here at York for giving us such a wonderful celebration earlier this year. We are hugely looking forward to our 20th anniversary awards at Ascot next February.

We should never lose sight of the work our staff put in and one night a year isn't enough. We should recognise them, in however small a way, every day.

The same, of course, applies to everyone who is responsible for caring for, handling and riding our horses. This is of course not without risk. The starkness of this fact has rarely been clearer than in the case of the awful accident involving Graham Lee recently.

Graham is a gentleman in the truest sense. His achievements in both Flat and Jump racing mark him out as one of the very best riders to grace our sport. His horsemanship, bravery, professionalism and resilience embody all the very best qualities of those who compete in British racing. The whole sport is praying for one of its very finest.

I now move to the challenges ahead

The changing landscape of British society is something all sports are having to grapple with, but racing faces some unique challenges.

Animal Rising in the first half of this year showed how quickly the welfare debate can turn against us.

We obviously want more people to engage with our sport but must recognise the issue of animal welfare is a deterrent for some, particularly younger audiences. In doing all we can to address perceptions about horse welfare, as well as the reality, we are not, as some would put it, pandering to a snowflake generation that will never engage with racing. Instead, we are displaying some hard-headed pragmatism about how we create fans of the future. Failure to create those fans only ends one way.

Politicians are people too! There may be a new Labour Government next year and we know from our own polling of MPs that animal welfare is a concern for many in the party. If we wish to maintain our right to regulate ourselves then lobbying of Westminster alone will not be enough. We will have to show, as well as tell.

It's not just horse welfare. It's our participants too. I've already mentioned the debt owed to our stable staff but the publication tomorrow of our updated safeguarding strategy is an important moment. It is vital we all engage with it.

The BHA, with the invaluable support of many colleagues in this room, will continue to make the case for racing into the heart of Government, including influencing Levy reform and the Gambling Act Review.

The fact that the BHA is not doing this alone – that we are working together with media partners, racecourses, owners, trainers, MPs and peers – shows that not only are we doing the right thing but also that the sport can successfully collaborate to deliver a high-impact lobbying campaign all the way into the PM's offices in No10.

These challenges are precisely what is behind my 'Call to Arms'...and a small grenade!

Six years ago, the excellent Ed Chamberlin stood in this spot and delivered this speech. Then, he urged us to grasp the nettle of modernisation, making an impassioned case that 16 years previously Sir Alex Ferguson addressed this gathering with a similar call to arms. Ed said then, and I quote: "Has anything changed in the sixteen years since Sir Alex Ferguson said those words here at York? I'm not sure."

Ed isn't here tonight but I'd like to play his question back to you all – has anything changed in the six years since he urged us all to modernise?

My short answer would be: “yes”. Then I would add: “but nowhere near enough.”

Let us first recognise, however, that we have already come a long way since Ed posed his challenge. We've got rid of the old tripartite system that was such a blocker on making progress. The new governance structure with the BHA Board at the top is already bringing greater clarity and dynamism to decision-making.

With key highlights including next year's fixture programme, extensive work to bring next year's Premier Racedays to life, a new People Board to deliver a bigger, better and happier workforce, the successful operation of the Commercial Committee, the developing Industry Strategy, improved relations with the betting industry, increased engagement with Parliament...then I think you can see we have made tangible progress.

What we have achieved so far – and we **should** recognise achievements have been made – while doubtless aided by our new governance structures, has in part relied on goodwill rather than, for now at least, a truly collective courage to make fundamental, far-reaching changes. Goodwill alone is not enough.

Let's not forget we are the country's second-biggest spectator sport. We remain a global leader in breeding, training, racing. We are one of Britain's greatest exports, one of its most important soft-power levers.

We should be purring along like a Ferrari. But too often vested interests, siloed operations and a general reluctance to embrace change makes it feel like we are driving a Ferrari with the handbrake on.

In any given week I am told by people, some of whom I work with regularly and sometimes by complete strangers, that they wouldn't want my job for all the tea in Yorkshire...

Well, the last few years HAVE been tough, in my view tougher than they needed to be, with hours spent persuading people towards change, and handling conflict as stakeholders turned inwards on each other.

I hope working together in 2024 on a range of initiatives designed to grow our fanbase - of owners, racegoers, viewers, bettors, all of whom invest and are invested in our sport – will bring greater trust and confidence. This in turn can achieve accelerated innovation based on what we learn, underpinned by newly shared data.

Trust will be a key factor if we want to deliver innovation at the scale and pace that will make a difference. If we find we are failing to make progress, that change remains elusive, then we need to find a way to remove one of the main barriers to trust. Transparency on how money flows through our sport, in my opinion, needs to be addressed. From participants to racecourses, bookmakers to Government, there remains a degree of

suspicion about where the money goes. This then breeds distrust and suspicion within the sport and creates a reason for us to fight each other rather than our competition.

We need to break these barriers down. If this is achieved through myth-busting presentations, through prize money agreements or greater transparency, if it is delivered through commercial contracts or regulation – I don't mind. I do think it would accelerate progress and allow us to take off the handbrake.

Well, that was my grenade in case you missed it!

I am an optimist

Despite the challenges ahead I go into next year with confidence. As I've said, while we have already achieved much there is much more to do. But as David Jones recently spelled out in his industry speech at this venue, as a sport we are facing up to these challenges with a more united front, a joint sense of purpose and spirit of genuine goodwill and collaboration than we have done for years. Perhaps ever.

In many ways that is testament to the professionalism, brilliance and bloody-minded tenacity as exemplified by everyone in this room.

We shouldn't just be proud of our sport we should be proud of each other. If we continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, reassure each other when there are moments of doubt, encourage each other to be bold and brave, build each other up instead of knocking each other down, then there is not a challenge that we should fear or that we can't overcome.

Ours is a truly glorious sport precisely because everyone involved in it is so passionate about it and because our equine stars are genuinely things of wonder.

And it is surely that wonder that we need to harness to capture the hearts and minds of future generations of fans.

Why am I so sure of that? Sometimes it's the little moments that can guide the way ahead. One of my colleagues took his nearly four-year-old son racing for the first time at the Paddy Power meeting in Cheltenham last month. He stood in the chute as the horses went past and whispered to his son: "Look there's Jonbon, he's one of the best horses in the whole world".

Awe-struck the young lad stood by the final fence and watched Jonbon sail over on his way to an eye-capturing win, cheering and clapping his new hero all the way. As the horses returned to the winners' enclosure the young man saw Jonbon coming back up the chute, turned to his dad and shouted, "look Daddy I can see Jonbon!". He was within touching distance of his new hero.

It was something unique to racing, an experience unlike anything any other sport can offer, and by the sounds of it an experience that will stay with him (and his proud father) for the

rest of his life. Or at the very least until his new horse-shaped balloon - named Jonbon inevitably - deflates. But hopefully much longer than that.

A small moment but a wonderful way to remind us of the captivating appeal of our sport for people of all ages.

Now I would like to invite all of you to stand up and join me in a toast the health of British racing.

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