

Grassroots funding priority after a whirlwind first year



Bill Barber speaks to **Charlie Liverton**, chief executive of the **Racehorse Owners Association**

IT IS probably fair to say more racing-and children dream of becoming a trainer when they grow up than a CEO. The same is true of Racehorse Owners Association chief executive Charlie Liverton, whose involvement in the sport might have been very different had his boyhood ambition been achieved.

Instead of heading up one of the most powerful sectional groups in British racing – a role he has now been in for a year – he could have been training racehorses, having learned from two of the masters of the game.

The origin of Liverton's involvement in racing came as a child following a visit to the races.

"I was brought up overseas – my father was in shipping, so I spent most of my childhood in the far east and it was when we moved back to live in Cheltenham when I was about 11 or 12 and got taken for a day's racing at Cheltenham that I fell in love with it," he recalls.

"That was the catalyst and I said in the car going back 'I'm going to be a racehorse trainer'."

Liverton's passion for racing was indulged at the various racourses close to Kingston University and it was while he was there that he went for interviews in Newmarket and got a job at Tattersalls in the bloodstock department.

It was there that he met Dick Kern, who asked Liverton if he wanted to join his operation.

Liverton, 43, describes his time as pupil assistant at West Hiley as "absolutely amazing".

He adds: "It was militarily precise. If and when you didn't meet his expectations he was quick to tell you but he was as quick to turn around and ask what you did the night before so it was easily forgotten."

Marcus Tregunna was assistant and he used to take me up for evening stables. I'd follow him round and learn the stuff on the ground. In the morning I was in the jeep with him watching them on the gallops so I was very spoilt."

Having spent 18 months with Kern, Liverton was on the move again, working for vet Mike O'Gorman, where his duties included helping to vet the subsequent Grand National winner Rough Quest a few days before his Argyll win.

While



working for O'Gorman he met another champion trainer in Richard Hannon.

"I went from being in the car to riding out, and I was right in the thick of things," Liverton says. "Tory Gorman, who was head lad up at Herridge, is the most amazing man. In time I looked after a barn with all the responsibility that came with that."

However, the realisation came that being a trainer was not going to be Liverton's future. He says: "I think you wake up one morning and look in the mirror and say I actually going to make it as a trainer."

"I think there's a difference between being absolutely passionate about something and realising you're good at something."

Liverton then left racing, joining



Dick Kern: "Amazing time with the master trainer"

'We have to make sure new money is focused on grassroots because that's for the benefit of the entire industry'

The three big issues on Liverton's desk

- ▶ **Fixtures and funding**, especially funding in the new levy era ensuring the focus is on delivering prize money to grassroots participants.
- ▶ **Ensuring that the mandate owners provided the industry through the owners' survey in 2016 is acted on and delivered**, in particular the race day experience for owners whether they have a runner or not.
- ▶ **Working with the ROA board to ensure that members' voices are represented and heard across the industry.**

industry," Liverton says.

"I slept on it for a few days and thought whether this was something I wanted to do. I put a phone call in and said 'If I was to apply would you consider the application?'. The rest is history."

In the past, British racing politics could sometimes make an episode of *House of Cards* look like a tea party, and it was not that long ago that owners and racecourses were at loggerheads.

IOWEVER, Liverton says: "I've been really surprised and pleased at how the three main constituents are genuinely pushing in the same direction and I've said this throughout my first year."

"We just have to look at the way the tripartite agreement got behind the BHA and the levy discussions with the government to show that actually we really are rather more collegial than we sometimes might appear."

British racing is tantalisingly close to getting its long-held wish of all betting operators contributing to the sport's funding no matter where they are based.

Prize-money, or the lack of it, has always been a top of owners' priority list and Liverton is no doubt that the extra funds that should be coming into the sport when the government's levy replacement scheme starts on April 1 should go.

"Let's not forget prize-money over the years has actually been going up –

so when we talk about it, it's actually the fact that what's going in at the middle and the bottom and what's going in at the top has been out of sync," Liverton says.

"So what we have to do now is underpin the top but overhaul and reinforce the middle and grassroots of racing."

"We really have to make sure the new money that's going to be coming in is focused there because that's for the benefit of the entire industry."

Having surveyed its membership last year, the ROA is now acting on what owners have told them.

"We're talking to racecourses about facilities for owners who don't have a runner on the day and how can we get more owners going racing knowing they have somewhere warm and comfortable to sit down and watch the racing," Liverton says.

"The other take for us was communication and engagement," he adds.

"We're out on the road now once a month and I'll sit down with 30 or 40 members to discuss all those issues that matter to them so the ROA can take it back first hand and say 'actually that's something we should be acting on'."

The future of Kempton is an issue that will affect ROA members but Liverton says it is hard to come to a position while nobody knows how much the sport would benefit financially from the Jockey Club's plans.

"It's quite difficult at the moment to really understand the numbers behind it," he says.

"It will affect horsemen, undoubtedly. Kempton services owners and trainers and jockeys in the south and south west, and it will be a massive loss if it goes."

The sport's relationship with the betting industry is another longstanding issue but Liverton acknowledged the message delivered by Sky Bet chief executive Richard Flint at the Gimcrack Dinner at the two sides need to work together.

"They are a fundamental part of the business model and that's something we're absolutely making sure happens," he says.

"I'll all I can say from an owner's perspective is that we very much hope we can build that bridge and that we can work together and grow with each other going forward."

Liverton says his first year in the role has been a "whirlwind" and he thanked ROA president Nicholas Cooper for his support.

"Nick has been absolutely fantastic, a real rock and I can't thank him enough for the hours over coffee and on the phone before board meetings and everything else."

"These are really exciting times for the industry as a whole and I'm really excited to be part of it and trying to help make the next leap forward with everyone on board. It has been a great first year."