



## **SPEECH FOR THE 250<sup>TH</sup> GIMCRACK DINNER BY NIALLO SLOANE ESQ.**

My President, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Six years ago when ITV started to look at purchasing the rights to Racing, one of our foremost thoughts was how do we grow and attract a broader base for the sport? How do we speak to and communicate to an audience that was sympathetic to the sport but didn't watch much of it? And our most powerful tool was of course that of a major free to air platform - the ability to speak to big audiences.

In our audience research we found that the coverage could often feel a little dry and removed from the excitement felt on a racecourse. We aligned production teams and marketing on the proposition of giving viewers 'the best seat in the house'. If viewers couldn't be there then we could make them feel like they were there. We wanted to resell the 'sport' and showcase the beauty and purity of it, disentangle the need or compulsion to watch it only if you have a bet on it.

First and foremost we tell the sports story to viewers but we are also communicating that a day spent at a racecourse is a day well spent for all who attend. We have promoted Racing in the heart of our peak schedule using soaps and some of our shows like Saturday Night Takeaway to showcase the sport to the wider base of our viewers. We haven't just focused on the key festivals, we want to spread the viewing peaks over the entire year, through all year round promotion and communication.

So there we were in 2017, back in Racing. The landscape looked a little different than ITV's first foray into the sport in 1969 with the coverage fronted by John Rickman and joined two years later by the estimable, Brough Scott, to this day a totem of all that is good about Racing. ITV quickly forged a much different identity from the BBC and were prepared to challenge the orthodoxy of how the TV coverage worked. This led them into some interesting confrontations with the powers that be. Barriers were being put up needlessly and there was little communication about what was best for the sport.

In another era but not THAT long ago when after some minor infraction, a production crew were told to report to the stewards at York... of all places. The first thing they were instructed to do was to "Take Your Hands Out of Your Pockets." When asked if they could sit down, they were told that they couldn't. Only one thing was being communicated there.

So how do we think proper Communication within Racing should work?

We DO feel that this should be a partnership. But it is not a partnership of equals. The people in this room tonight represent a huge part of the sport's constituency. We, ITV, are simply the broadcaster. But we can help you in so many ways. Has anyone seen anything that showcases the sport better than Home Schooling? A lovely simple idea that proved some good things can come out of pandemic. For those of you who haven't seen, it is the Racing family sending us video clips shot



on their phones of the wide panoply of Racing activities throughout the length of the land. Simple idea, simply wonderful.

I wonder how many of you saw that fascinating insight during the Breeders Cup coverage from Del Mar. Simple idea. How does a top horse travel from Europe to southern California? A lot of people coming to the coverage would not have known. An informative four minute revealed how it happened. We could not have made that film without the fantastic co-operation from Charlie Appleby and head lad Chris Connett.

We have tried assiduously to make the sport more accessible. Racing is a sport well catered for if you are a true follower. It has a dedicated paper and two subscription channels for Racing fanatics and the wider industry - and they all do a great job. But on free to air, hoping to attract an audience way beyond that narrower remit we have to use a different language as we try to lift the covers on what can be a complex sport. This has been met with some expected, and perhaps understandable criticism. But we shouldn't change course and we won't.

We are in our fifth year of broadcasting and from our perspective the co-operation we have received at meetings has been, by and large terrific. Very few people turn an interview down, win or lose, all are gracious, and some are wonderfully loquacious. The peaks have been plentiful, our storytelling has witnessed some astounding triumphs, bravery and epic achievement. And so it should be, given the unique partnership of human and horse. But we can still do things better. The great thing about having a presenter like Ed Chamberlin is his constant drive to ask his production colleagues to do more and more to illustrate how good a day at a racecourse can be. But we need help to communicate through our words and images. For example, the use of drones. Some of you may think that, by now, you are listening to one...

But what we mean... is it REALLY the case that a two year old horse can be frightened by a drone? Has anyone got any evidence or did someone just state that seven or eight years ago because it sounded right? Can we have a chat about that and several other parts of the wider horizon? All we want to do is to make you and your sport look as good as possible.

But is everything rosy? No, of course not. All sports have their constituent administrative parts. Football in England has FIFA, UEFA, the Premier League, the FA and the Football League. Rugby has World Rugby, the unions and the clubs. That can feel like a multiplicity of vested interests but they are nothing compared to Racing. And everyone is claiming that it is the broader coalition of Racing that they are working for and on behalf of. But when you burrow underneath, the true concern is not always the collective good but that of a narrower fiefdom. How can that sectionality ever be reconciled?

As an individual in my role for ITV I am an observer and not here to deliver a speech with solutions. I haven't got any. Many wiser people than me have had this platform and we still seem stuck in the same place. But broader, and more frequent, open communication would be a start. As I say Racing is not alone. The sports I have mentioned and others suffer from dissent and tension both domestically and globally. Why? Because, in truth, sports are neither true collectives nor rational



businesses. They are essentially emotional vehicles for both participants, fans and the people who administer them. Nobody leaves their home on a Saturday morning to attend a rational, structured set of events.

Sport is chaos, and that is its glory. Anything can happen. But unfortunately that chaos is all too evident in future-proofing and protecting the sport's widest interests. We have people at ITV who want to play a part in helping people to secure Racing's future. Over the years I have been worried by some Talent and producers I have worked with and at other broadcasters. They seem to believe that they work in that sport. They don't. They work for the broadcaster who employs them. There is a huge difference. I am very clear to our teams. We do not want to run the sport of Racing in any shape or form. But we have a large number of people who can make suggestions and play a part in shaping its future. Please consider them when you want some independent counsel and informed opinion.

Over the last year we have witnessed some pretty bad optics around the sport, both from sole individuals' distasteful actions, combatants' angry fallouts and constituent members of Racing negotiating for months and failing to agree on anything. Many sports say they are in perpetual crisis. But that is usually because they become fixated on the here and now rather than trying to build for the future. If we communicate together with a common and transparent purpose for the good of Racing that surely must be a start.

I would like to end the evening with some thoughts from a former colleague at the BBC, Julian Wilson. Some of you know that his greatest thrill in Racing came when, commentating on radio, he watched his own horse Tumbledownwind win the 1977 Gimcrack. Later he took stock of the achievement recalling the start of the race.

"The next 1 minute 17.37 seconds were filled with hope, anticipation, concern, despair, reassurance and ultimately joyous triumph."

I can think of no greater summation of the contrasting emotions of this wonderful sport. It therefore gives me great pleasure to reply on behalf of British Racing and in so doing, I would like you to raise your glasses to the future success and prosperity of British Racing.