

# Sport

## Stalls handlers' fears over safety

### TIMES INVESTIGATION

Mark Souster Racing Writer

Stalls handlers at Arena Racing are expected to voice their concerns today about safety, welfare and training at work at a meeting called by the company, which is the second-largest racecourse operator in Britain.

Although Arena Racing Company (ARC) insists that the meeting in Wolverhampton is a routine one, the announcement follows a three-month investigation by *The Times* into allegations made by several present and former workers amid unrest among the workforce.

*The Times* has spoken to nine stalls handlers who highlight what they claim to be poor working practices that could endanger individuals. They believe new handlers, whose training is approved by the British Horseracing Authority (BHA), are being employed despite in some cases having only

minimal experience of thoroughbred horses. Some, it is claimed, are not familiar with basic practices such as checking girths, nor know what a tongue-strap is.

The men interviewed by *The Times* have set out a catalogue of complaints and incidents at five of the courses where ARC handles its own stalls operation. These are Wolverhampton, Lingfield Park, Windsor, Doncaster and Southwell. Altogether they own 16 tracks. "It is a complete nightmare," one said. Another added: "There is an accident waiting to happen." As well as concerns over a lack of experience, there are also issues with the maintenance of the stalls themselves.

Our investigation was prompted by the tragic death in July of Stephen Yarborough, a team leader at the main racecourse stalls operator RaceTech, in an accident at Haydock Park. It is thought that he was run over by a tractor. There is no suggestion that any

of the concerns over Arena Racing relate in any way to RaceTech, who are regarded as the "best in the business" by stalls handlers.

A letter dated November 13, which set out the planned meeting, said that it was a "great opportunity to get together and discuss any issues or suggestions for the year ahead".

The stalls handlers' concerns were summed up in a text message sent on July 1 to his superiors by Steve Kitching, a stalls handler with 12 years' experience. It followed the introduction of new terms and conditions for the casual worker team in February. In protest at the treatment of staff he refused to work at Windsor that day.

"A level of training or at least common knowledge/experience should be compulsory in order to have a safe working environment, protecting both the jockeys and horses, and the stalls team," Kitching wrote.

"I feel that when working with new members of staff that have either very

little or in fact no experience of handling racehorses it is unsafe and I do not wish to work under these conditions as I feel you are putting your workforce in danger." According to ARC, new contracts were designed to reconfirm their existing status as casual workers, whose number is about 40.

It did, however, create considerable resentment and two stalls handlers challenged ARC, claiming that their employment rights had been compromised. ARC eventually agreed a financial settlement this autumn without accepting any liability. ARC insists the new terms and conditions did not remove any previous rights.

It appears that Kitching spoke for many of his former colleagues who have aired their views on the race-day working environment at ARC, which is owned by the billionaire Reuben brothers, David and Simon. They made their fortune in property. Last year they were named by *The Sunday Times* as Britain's richest people with a net worth of £13.3 billion. They bought ARC in 2012.

At Wolverhampton on October 7 a handler was head-butted by a horse and had to be stood down. "Horses are half a tonne of muscle with a mind of their own. They can rear up, kick, bite," Kitching said in a separate interview. "Thoroughbreds are not like a car with brakes and controls. When you work day in and day out you get a feel for a horse, if he is going to kick you. You look at his eye, at his temperament."

All handlers are signed up as casuals and earn about £130 per day. They can work up to 15 days a month. The 11-man teams are headed by a team leader, who supervises, six "leaders", who walk a horse into the stalls, and four pushers, who combine when necessary to ensure a reluctant horse is propelled forward.

"The individual receives a casual worker handbook. ARC offers work on a month-to-month basis," a spokeswoman for ARC said. "There is no 'mutuality of obligation', meaning ARC doesn't have to offer an individual work."

Long-serving handlers claim that the training is inadequate, even if ARC does adhere strictly to industry standards as

set down by the BHA and only employs individuals who have been passed by the regulatory body, who in turn have assessed their CVs.

They undergo six days' on-site training before a BHA starter decides whether they are competent. "They can either accredit the individual, recommend further training or recommend the person is not accredited," the ARC spokeswoman said.

This may then raise wider questions about how rigorously the BHA actually polices the training of stalls handlers, how detailed the background checks are and how fit for purpose the system is. A BHA spokesman said: "We go through CVs to make sure they have the necessary horsemanship experience to be allowed to commence training."

One handler remains dubious. "A new employee will turn up, watch a couple of races from the rails which they say is an induction day, then be pitched in," he said.

Don Corr, 63, another 12-year veteran, said: "The people being employed now do not always have the experience. There is a serious accident waiting to happen. We tried to point this out but got nowhere."

Some workers also allegedly ride on the stalls when they are being moved, which is forbidden. "You only have to slip and you are under the wheels," another handler said. "Some people treat it like a climbing frame."

One incident occurred on February 13, 2016, at Wolverhampton when a worker was knocked over and the stalls ran over his leg. He was fortunate to escape with only bruising. ARC insists that handlers must not ride on the stalls. Others complain at having to change advertising panels at the top of stalls 15ft up in high winds.

In June this year one worker was hurt when trying to move a bar on the stalls at Wolverhampton. It had become stuck because it had been overly tightened. ARC said: "All machinery is maintained in line with the manufacturer's recommendations." Against this backdrop it promises to be an interesting day.



Arena Racing is owned by Simon, left, and David Reuben

## Insider Travel

THE TIMES  
THE SUNDAY TIMES

Book now  
with low  
deposits from  
£49pp\*

Six days from  
**£539**  
per person

#### PRICE INCLUDES

A visit to the Giant's Causeway and Visitor Centre

Time to explore Donegal town

A visit to Glenveagh National Park and a guided tour of Glenveagh Castle

A scenic coastal drive  
A tour of the rugged Inishowen Peninsula including a visit to the Doagh Isle Famine Village

Five nights' dinner, bed and Irish breakfast accommodation at the Station House Hotel, Letterkenny (upgrades available)

Return flights to Belfast  
Comfortable coach travel and transfers

Services of a friendly, experienced tour manager

## Donegal and the Giant's Causeway

Enjoy stunning coastal and mountain scenery on this six-day fully-escorted break. Discover iconic sights from Giant's Causeway to the Inishowen Peninsula and explore Donegal town and the beautiful Glenveagh National Park with its castle.

Selected departures April to October, 2018.

Book now

0330 160 6546 quoting TIM | [thetimes.co.uk/deals](http://thetimes.co.uk/deals)

\*Low deposit of £49 per person applies to new bookings made between November 1 and December 22, 2017 (inclusive) only. This offer is subject to availability and may be withdrawn at any time. These holidays are organised and operated by Newmarket Air Holidays Ltd. ABTA V7812. ATOL protected 2325. Subject to availability. Single supplements apply. Standard land line charges apply. KL561.



## Rival goads Joshua with video nasty

Joseph Parker, the WBO heavyweight champion, called out Anthony Joshua yesterday in a bid to nail down a unification bout (Ron Lewis writes).

Parker, the New Zealander, released a video of Joshua, who was occupied with promotional work in Dubai yesterday, right, designed to expose the Briton as "chippy" and featuring clips from amateur bouts and interviews from sparring partners.

Parker's promoters say that he has been undervalued in talks with Eddie Hearn, Joshua's promoter.



DUBAI TOURISM