

Look to US for site that serves racing with rigour and elegance

SURF & TURF



Racing on the web with **Robin Gibson**

THE latest communique from Virgin Media, suppliers of broadband, TV and phone for a heartwarming price not much above that of a season ticket for the Emirates, featured another of their informal messages.

"Keep up," it said in a blunt, vaguely angry tone, before introducing a month's free trial of a service showing old movies. Turns out this is their new slogan. It's on the tube, too, presumably working as a subliminal corporate cattleprod for commuters lollygagging on the trek to work.

Anyone who thinks they can't keep up these days must be seriously progressive. After all, if you are focused on what the future might look like or even what's going on now, there is no way you have time to keep up with the reanimated Yes, Prime Minister, the reformed Boomtown Rats, the reheated Three Stooges (yes, coming in April) or dozens of old movies on Virgin TV.

If you keep up with developments in social media, you might have heard that MySpace, emblem of online investor folly and a financial anti-Midas lesson (turn \$580 million into \$35m in seven years without doing anything), has relaunched. It's now called **Myspace**.

In time-honoured Surf & Turf style, I signed up to bring news of horseracing on Myspace (not MySpace). But there appears to be none. The site is now focused on music (it's mainly owned by Justin Timberlake), but it's worth having a look just to see the skyscraper search function, which displays your query in screen-high capital letters. Just don't use any long words, as they slide off the screen. If this is a USP it's certainly brave.

Thorough excavation revealed something – although it could be a relic

from the old MySpace – in the shape of **Vintage British Sport** (Volume 1), an audio archive of commentaries.

Racing is represented, quite interestingly, by the 1940 Grand National, the 1941 Derby, an unidentified greyhound race in which Mr Cholmondley-Warner appropriately has trouble identifying the greyhounds, and a curio with Chester Wilmot broadcasting on Derby day 1944 from a troop ship. The troops are naturally impatient to unship and get fighting, but wait to hear a poor-quality broadcast of the aptly named Ocean Swell winning.

There are a few bands on Myspace with songs called 'Horse Racing', but that is all there is. If Vintage British Sport was ongoing, it would be fascinating – an audio complement to the impressive stacks of Pathe newsreel at **britishpathe.com**. But it seems to be a finite collection and, on closer inspection, it's also an album, available on Amazon in MP3 format for £7.49, or 89p a track. Try the free version.

Myspace is not keeping up with racing, but keeping up with racing lately has been easy. Apart from a vast slogathon at Cheltenham and a handful of paddling events in Ireland, it's been less complicated to keep up with than the Kardashians, with little happening and much of what does soggy and uncompetitive.

What there has been is an unprecedented glut of all-weather racing. Plenty of racing enthusiasts – and not just those who turn up at the ski run in tweed – have no intention of keeping up with the all-weather.

You could argue that, despite the lack of public sectional timing, it might provide the sandscape for modern punditry and forensic analysis. However, online advocacy for the all-weather is rare. It's around, but it's spartan.

There's Slippery Toad (**slipperytoad.co.uk**), who provides original daily all-weather ratings and pace maps, thoughtfully compiled if in a slightly challenging format. The Toad is dry, but he provides satisfying morsels, like a cream cracker.

Sandracer (**sandracer.com**) has been around for ages, ploughing a furrow oblivious to fashion. The site,

'The Slippery Toad is dry, but he provides satisfying morsels, like a cream cracker'

more accurately blog, makes the staid Slippery Toad look like a fashionable boutique high on LSD, but diligently posts selective daily tips.

Timesofsand (@timesofsand) provides a similar service on Twitter and there are plenty of bloggers who pay lip service to the all-weather. Many advise compiling your own time figures, but as anyone will confirm after reading chapter one of Nick Mordin's seminal work Mordin On Time, you are going to need a hell of a lot of time to do that.

These sites and pages are a few strands that barely form a fragile network. Given the abundance of all-weather fare on a small number of tracks – consistent and easy to monitor – you could say it is surprising that there isn't more, but pace and speed analysis appeals to only a small, anoraky part of the British and Irish demographic.

CONTRAST this to the US. America's Best Racing mirrors Love The Races in Britain, marketing the sport by weaving social pleasure into the sporting fabric. But Britain has nothing such as the excellent Hello Race Fans (**helloracefans.com**), whose slightly clunky mission statement is to be "the digital equivalent of the relative who introduces you to racing for those not fortunate enough to have such a relative".

HRF might be all deep end, but it is inviting to dive in: the aspiring horseplayer is welcomed not with tips on what to wear or how to find the bar, but a menu of thoughtful articles on class, distance, race conditions, pace, patterns and psychology.

The site, administered by blogger and author Dana Byerley (who pens much of the content) and digital brain Adam Weiner, features many absorbing pieces introducing virtually every aspect of the sport and draws in key analysis from other writers in its Raceday 360 section.

It's a resource that doesn't equate the beginner with an infant or cretin and shows that telegraphing the thrill and excitement of the sport can be achieved alongside a degree of intellectual rigour and elegance. And that's got to be good. Nothing about Wolverhampton or Lingfield, mind.

Email Robin Gibson at robin.gibson@racingpost.com or follow him on Twitter @surfnturfRP



MY TOP FIVE

Owner **John Hales** outlines plans for the pick of his current crop

Neptune Collonges

He won the Grand National, which was brilliant, and he's retired now but he still parades regularly to raise money for charity, with the Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool the main beneficiary. He will parade at Aintree before the National and we're working on the possibility of taking him to the hospital on the day before. It's not definite but I'm hoping we can – we're doing everything we can to make it happen.

Al Ferof

His run in the Paddy Power was brilliant, a phenomenal performance – as good as any by a horse I've owned. The injury wasn't related to that run and it was a minor nick to a tendon, but the dream lives on and we are targeting a return in the King George on Boxing Day next season.

Unioniste (below)

He also won a big handicap at Cheltenham and while that was not a complete surprise, we didn't know he was as good as he's turned out to be. Paul [Nicholls] thinks he's awesome and he has the potential to be outstanding. He's only just turned five, so is open to plenty of improvement. He's had a well-earned rest and is being built back up for Cheltenham.

Fascino Rustico

He was bought for a lot of money at Brightwells [£310,000] and he's not proven anything yet but he has a huge amount of ability. The speed he showed when winning his Carlisle bumper was impressive and then he went to Cheltenham and was fourth, but he struggled with his breathing so he was given a wind op. He's being aimed at the bumper at Cheltenham and I think he'll run a big race.

Mac's Return

He's a recent purchase and another that's all potential at this stage. For a potential three-miler he has a lot of speed. We don't have too much time to get a run into him as I like my horses to have at least four weeks off before Cheltenham, but I'd have no worries about going straight there as Paul can get them fit at home. He'll go for the two-and-a-half-miler [Neptune Investment Management Novices' Hurdle] and he'll go chasing next year. I love the way he won his bumper in Ireland and he's pleased all at Ditcheat since he arrived.



TOM KERR'S SUNDAY SERMON



LAST week I delivered from my little pulpit a dire prophecy about a looming mini ice age and the terrible effect this would have on winter racing. Since newspaper deadlines now require contributors submit copy a lunar cycle before publication little did I know that my doom-mongering would coincide with a great thaw, making it the publishing equivalent of shouting at the exact moment the entire room goes quiet.

I had advanced a theory (in between panic buying petrol, loo roll, methylated spirits etc) that colder winters could lead to the loss of an ever-greater number of jumps fixtures. Therefore, I said, we should

The answer's in the name: let's start getting synthetic about AW

consider toughening up the runt of the racing litter, all-weather, so it can stand on its own four feet instead of mewling pathetically in the corner.

It's now clear that attempting to sell the all-weather when jump racing is ongoing is like rattling a charity bucket for the endangered Chinese giant salamander when the next guy over wants to save lovely sad-eyed pandas. And the rumours are true, yes, the giant salamander is grotesque and terrifying. But it's robust, sturdy and lives underwater,

just like the all-weather. All they need, both of them, is to be a little more appealing. They need a rebranding.

It strikes me that the all-weather has a clear disadvantage: its name. All-weather. It sounds like the sort of thing a sadistic PE teacher would preface the words "cross-country run" with. Almost anything can be ruined by placing those words in front. Try it yourself. All-weather beach, all-weather cinema, all-weather children's play park. Awful.

It has become synonymous with poor-quality racing, too. Yet two of the world's richest races, the Dubai World Cup and Breeders' Cup Classic, have been run on artificial surfaces. Did they call it all-weather racing? No, they did not.

So, there's my idea. Sure, other things could be done. Higher-quality races could be scheduled when snow strikes, prize-money could be increased and carefully targeted to provide a financial incentive for superior horses to remain in training through the winter, entry fees could be axed, imaginative entertainment could be laid on.

Or we could just rename the all-weather the synthetic turf. I leave it with you.