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Let's promote owners

A BRIEF but interesting conversation with Rachel Hood at Goodwood, on championships, prompted me to look out the piece she wrote on the subject for Owner & Breeder magazine back in March.

In short, Rachel, and many others, want to see separate championships for different codes of racing and they believe that this will help us to better promote our stars – principally, the jockeys – and, in turn, our sport. I'm not so sure.

I cannot but agree that the present structure for the flat jockey, trainer and owner championships

is a mess and is of little interest to the public. The flat jockeys' championship runs from March 29, 2014 until November 8, 2014, whereas the flat trainers' championship runs from November 10, 2013 and ends on November 8, 2014. And as for the owners' championship, well, I'm not sure about that one: I couldn't find any record of it in a dozen or so copies of the Racing Post that I looked at.

I did find tables for the top horses, the top sires, the top sires of two-year-olds, the top first-season sires, the top flat broodmare sires, and the top European Pattern race sires. All run from January 1 to December 31. What else? What else would be meaningful, especially in a sport where competitors (horses) are separated into age groups based on the calendar year in which they were foaled?

Different

If the proposals were for two, or three-tier racing – as mooted by Rachel's husband, John Gosden, a couple of years ago – then different championships for different tiers would make perfect sense. But those operating, or participating, in tiers two and three would have to accept that there might not be a great deal of

kudos attached to the title of 'Champion'.

Likewise, if we were going to have different championships for different codes of flat racing – turf and all-weather – then there would be a clear distinction between which races were in which codes and which jockeys and trainers were the most prolific or successful. And let's face it, like it or not, all-weather racing would be seen as a very poor second to turf.

But the proposals are for a core flat season starting at the Guineas meeting and ending on Champions' Day at Ascot. In 2014 this would have excluded more

compete outside the core period? Would they prefer to remain abroad and race for much more money and wait for better weather, and the championships, to return to Britain?

It is worth looking back at the history of the current situation. It was simple before the introduction of year-round, all-weather flat racing and summer jumping. There was a significant gap between the end of a season and the beginning of the next and I'm not aware that there were any calls to change the structure.

When all-weather racing started to take off the flat championships ran from

January 1 to December 31

and, in 1994, Frankie Dettori and my good friend Jason Weaver (retained by MJR at the time) became the first two flat jockeys ever to

ride 200 winners in Britain in one year. Frankie repeated the feat the next year but, I hope he won't mind me saying, he neither needed nor wanted to work that hard and, above all, his employer Sheikh Mohammed wanted him to be in Dubai for the winter.

The Dubai Carnival was born and many top jockeys went there or to other sunny climes where the racing is much more lucrative than in Britain. But they didn't want to sacrifice their chance of being champion and, to be blunt, they didn't want those jockeys who chose to grind it out in all weathers on British sand tracks to have an unassailable lead by April.

Responsibility

In reality, for the most part, the same jockeys would have been champion under the old calendar-year system except in 2012 when it would have been a certain Joe Fanning, and the same jockey would be leading this year. The high-earners couldn't take that risk and those vested with the responsibility for marketing our sport agreed with them. And so,



Hamilton flies the champion owner's colours alongside the Scottish flag

the split seasons for flat jockeys' championships were born.

The trainers' championship remained based on the calendar year for a long time afterwards until, about three or four years ago, the system was changed, in April, without bothering to tell the participants. This was done to create a 'finale' for the season and it was decided at the time, with considerable pressure from Arena Leisure, that this should be at Doncaster in November when the champion trainer was, most likely, in Barbados or at the Breeders' Cup.

Mess

Pressure from trainers brought about a compromise and we reverted to a 12-month season but with the start and finish in November. It is a mess and the Racing Post website now publishes four different flat trainers' tables.

I agree it needs changing but it requires very careful thought. We have to consider whether we can make it meaningful enough to drive the behaviour of participants. If we can, we must drive for behaviour which benefits British racing as a whole.

YOU may feel that, in querying the proposals for new championships, I am not being particularly constructive. I have warned of the dangers of promoting a core season but I have not offered an alternative which will have a positive impact on our sport.

In fact, I have grave doubts as to whether a jockeys' championship or trainers' championship can have a major impact on the sport but I do think that championships can drive behaviour and, ultimately, the economy of a sport. It is certainly the case in football and in F1.

In football the championships are for the teams, not for the players and, in F1, while the publicity and marketing revolves around a drivers' championship, it is undoubtedly the teams that drive the battle for supremacy and the economy of the sport.

We should, surely, be looking to a similar model for racing. I have already pointed out that the forgotten championship in racing is the owners' championship. To my mind it is by far the most important.

If we concentrate on the promotion of the owners' championship, and make champion owner a really meaningful title, we can drive behaviour and, if leading owners really aspired to being champion it would encourage competition and, ultimately, increase investment in the industry for the benefit of all.

The same can never be said for trainers or jockeys. An owner who aspires to be champion will have to invest more in horses, and people, to do so. That, as we know, has a knock-on effect all the way down the chain.

And there is so much that we could do, at very little cost, to make the owners' championship meaningful. Owners will not be drawn by a trophy or a single ceremony, especially if it takes place on a wet Saturday in November, and a cash incentive would have to be enormous to

drive investment. But there is an endless array of things we could do to promote the title of champion owner and elevate the status.

I believe that the owners' championship should run for the calendar year – when two-year-olds are two-year-olds and so on – and that the champion owner should be regarded as the most important person in British racing throughout the following year until a new champion is crowned.

Iconic

At Hamilton Park we fly the colours of our champion owner over the grandstand. Why not fly the colours of the overall champion owner at every racecourse in Britain and have a statue of a jockey, wearing those colours, at every entrance?

Why not have certain races, especially on Champions' Day, prefixed with the name of the current champion and trophies presented by and/or in the name of the champion owner at Royal Ascot, Cheltenham and all our other iconic meetings.

It surely wouldn't be rocket science to promote the champion owner as the most important person in British racing for a year. Currently, I am ashamed to say, most of us have no idea who is champion owner.

Test your knowledge of British champions

- 1 - Who was champion owner in 2012 and 2013?
- 2 - Who was champion owner in 2010 and 2011?
- 3 - Who was champion owner in 2008?
- 4 - Who has won the most owners' championships in the last 25 years? How many?
- 5 - Who has won the most consecutive owners' championships in the last 25 years? How many?

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