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Driving behaviour

ALAN LEE of the Times is one of the most, if not the most, respected journalists in racing and he is the latest to join the debate on jockeys' and trainers' championships. His opinion will carry a considerable amount of weight, especially in this case as it mirrors that of the sport's marketing men who want a championship that starts after the beginning of the turf and ends on Champions Day. He, and they, also want to see significant cash incentives for participants. I fear that they haven't thought it through.

Do we want further incentives – as if there aren't enough already – for our top jockeys to spend more time abroad? As I have said before, if these championships are really meaningful, they will drive behaviour and for many jockeys that will mean an extension of the time they spend in warmer climes where prize-money is so much better than at home.

For trainers the situation might be even worse. Is it right to provide financial incentives for trainers to run owners' horses at particular tracks or during a particular period when it may not be in the best interests of the horse or its owner? It has been done on the all-weather and at some individual tracks and, even when I have been the beneficiary, I have always said it is wrong.

Meaningful

On Sunday October 26 the Racing Post printed more than two pages of championship league tables for trainers and jockeys, on the flat and over jumps, in Britain and Ireland. There was no mention of owners and Alan Lee and many others are seeking to exacerbate this situation.

If we are going to have meaningful championships that drive behaviour, then by far the most important would be an owners' championship. That might just bring some investment into the sport. Too many still forget that owners are racing's biggest customer, by far.

Alan Lee is pushing for something to be done quickly on this and I fear that he may get his wish. It would not be unusual for new championships to be announced with little or no consultation and not much more thought.

The Emperor's new clothes?

IF there is one thing we have learned for sure from four years of Champions Day, it is that, if you put on enough prize-money, horses will turn up and the number of non-runners will be very small regardless of how bad the ground is.

Eighty-four horses were declared to run in the six races on Champions Day and all but three of them appeared. The times were very slow, ranging from 4.9 seconds above standard for the sprint to a whopping 14.77 seconds for the Long Distance Cup. The distance between first and last ranged from 14 lengths in the six-furlong race, run on Ascot's state-of-the-art, super-drained new straight course, to 77 lengths for the mile handicap run on the wait a minute same state-of-the-art track. Compare that with 17 lengths between the first and last of 28 runners in the Royal Hunt Cup run over the same course and distance in June.

However, it has to be said that the majority of the 28,000-strong crowd were oblivious to these facts and thought this was the pinnacle of British flat racing. They thought that because they have been told it is not just the pinnacle of British flat racing but the 'finale of the European flat season' by organisers and promoters who, no doubt, genuinely

believe that it is. And, to be fair, all of those involved in running the event and most participants seemed to hail it as a great success.

However, one man, bloodstock agent Tom Goff, had an "Emperor's New Clothes" moment and wrote to the Racing Post condemning the whole thing and calling for a return to the autumn programme of old. If you ask me, he has a good point; or, should I say, many good points.

I have had grave reservations from the outset about running Group 1 races at Ascot in mid-October and, like Tom Goff, I believe that it was entirely logical for the majority of our top end-of-season races to be run at Newmarket on what is probably the best draining natural turf track in the world.

The chief executive of Great British Racing and British Champions Series Rod Street, unsurprisingly, doesn't agree and he wrote his own long letter to the Racing Post effectively branding Tom Goff as a Luddite. He actually opens by agreeing with Tom on one point and that is that it is not an option to move Champions Day to September and a clash with Irish Champions Weekend because 'that date belongs to Ireland'.

Eh? At a time when we should be ques-



Heavy going saw Champions Day times far slower than average

tioning all racecourses in Britain on their belief that they own the right to race on certain days, to the exclusion of others, regardless of the effect on the overall health of the sport, should Rod Street be accepting that Leopardstown, or any other track, has an exclusive right to a certain date? Maybe he missed the fact that Irish Champions Day clashes with the St Leger, our oldest classic.

ROD Street claims that the Fillies and Mares race has been upgraded to Group 1 and the Long Distance Cup upgraded to Group 2 'reflecting the higher-rated horses the races have attracted in their new slots'.

'New slots'? Did they have old slots? I thought they were new races. The attraction, as I said at the outset, is the prize-money, not the slot. The winner of the Long Distance Cup got £178,636, which is just £34,000 short of the winnings for the Ascot Gold Cup and more than three times what you get for winning the G2 Doncaster Cup. A pretty big carrot for a horse (this year's winner Forgotten

Rules) having the third start of its life after making its debut in a National Hunt Flat Race in April. They'd turn up for that if you ran it on a ploughed field.

Come to think of it, that's exactly what Ryan Moore said it was like.

In defending the state of the ground Rod Street states that 'BHA statistics show that in Flat turf races ground described as heavy is the safest racing surface, both in terms of fatalities and long-term injuries'. Is that the case? I very much doubt it.

I remember that the BHA trotted out some figures on injury rates earlier this year in response to Richard Hughes's attack on watering policy which showed that injury rates increased with the firmness of the ground, but they are based on very limited data. In particular they make no comparison between ground variation on the same track (e.g. there is probably more firm ground at Bath than at any other track) and I know for a fact that the BHA struggle to get information on anything but the most acute injuries which occur on track. Long-term injuries are most commonly soft-tissue injuries, which I would expect to be most com-

☐ **WE HAVE** recently been informed that BHA rules will now require safety helmets worn by riders to comply with British Safety Standards published in 2012. Most of our riders have been issued with helmets that comply with the 1997 standard and we still have a number of new helmets in stock with that 'kite mark'.



The labels in the new helmet

We contacted the manufacturer and we were told that the helmets have not changed but, obviously, helmets sold before 2012 could not be tested to that standard. If they had been, they would have passed as they are identical to the current helmet but, with the 1997 label inside, they will not comply.

One member of staff bought her own helmet last year with the 2012 kite mark. The label is now coming off and it reveals that the 1997 label is underneath.

Is this not bureaucracy gone mad? It's good news for bureaucrats in Brussels, or wherever they sit, writing rules which keep themselves in a job; and it's very good news for helmet manufacturers who can stick a new label in a helmet and make it comply with the latest BHA regulations; but it's bad news for riders and their employers who will be significantly out of pocket but no safer than they were before.

'Today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip wrapper'. Isn't that what they

used to say before the advent of polystyrene trays and plastic carrier bags? Maybe now we should say that 'today's news is tomorrow's horse bedding' especially on many of Britain's racetracks and that might explain why Arena Racing Company (ARC) realise that, if they keep shunting about their £810,000 shortfall on prize-money commitment, the problem will just go away.

They did make a very brief statement which tried to divert attention on to the Racing Post's failure to pay for data and then went off at a tangent to a claim that 'its formation in 2012 led to a very significant increase in prize-money levels across racecourses which were previously owned by Arena and Northern Racing. In 2010 Executive Contribution for Arena and Northern racecourses totalled £3.5m which in 2014 will have increased to £11.3m, an increase of 223% on the 2010 level'. And, amazingly, they weren't even challenged on this.

Shortchanged by shortfall

Why, if ARC was formed in 2012, did managing director Tony Kelly refer to the increase in executive contribution since 2010? Simple really. That 223% increase in 'executive contribution' is largely down to the shift from Levy-based income to media rights money and has nothing to do with any benevolence on the part of ARC.

It is true that in 2013/14 they have sought to increase the quality of races on the all-weather with a programme building towards their All Weather Champions Day at Lingfield. But it should be noted that, apart from on the big day itself, virtually every race in their upgraded programme was run at the minimum value and it appears that the same will apply in the coming season.

So, come on ARC, are you going to make up for the shortfall? Your prize-money is still scraping along the bottom. Show us that you can be trusted and add £810,000 over and above your prize-money commitment for 2015.