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# Change for change's sake

ONE thing I surely cannot be accused of is resistance to change. I do sometimes think that my penchant for change is a little over-rated but resistant I am not.

I am known for trying new things. In fact, Deirdre says that, when I do decide on a new tool or gadget, I buy two of them and then, when I am proved wrong, there are two pieces of expensive equipment left to rust behind a barn.

But still I keep trying to do things just a

little bit differently in an attempt to find the optimum or even just to make us look a little bit different from the rest. When we arrived in Middleham I said that, if we can't be the best, we must look like the best and people laughed at us.

When we were the first to adopt a logo, Always Trying, for our team, they

laughed again and I know that, to this day, some like to ridicule and mock that logo – I have heard them. But it doesn't stop me trying new things in order to keep our business fresh and, if possible, on an upward curve. It doesn't stop me from embracing new ideas.

But change for the sake of change is a big mistake and change for the sake of keeping some marketing gurus in a

properly considered. And even more difficult to imagine that the effects of changes to the owners' championship have been given any consideration whatsoever.

Rod Street, chief executive of Great British Racing, tells us that 'racing's seasons have arguably lost their relevance'. That is true. How can a season be considered relevant when racing

takes place all year round and races of all types are run in and out of 'season'? How can a championship period be considered relevant if structured in the same

way?

They are calling it the 'core premier Flat racing period' but there are 64 turf meetings taking place outside that period including, six at Doncaster, five at Newmarket, four at Newbury, and meetings at Sandown, Epsom, Haydock and Ascot. The list goes on and on and includes all types of races from estab-

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job, like painting all the tails on BA airliners in obscure and widely different patterns, is madness. Potential negative consequences should always be given serious consideration.

It is difficult to accept that the potential negative consequences of shortening the flat jockeys' championship to under six months of the year have been

calendar year. And, of course, there is nothing to stop jockeys from riding in non-championship races.

The champion jockey will now, if all goes to plan, be crowned on Champions Day and Rod Street claims that this will raise the profile of our top jockeys and the sport in general. I'm not so sure.

## Meaningful

It seems that the main arguments for this new structure and its significant prize fund are based on trying to make the championship more meaningful to the top jockeys and seeking to ensure that they ride here in the UK as much as possible during that 'core' six-month period. And the main arguments against the old system were that it was too arduous for the jockeys and so some would opt not to compete. But the reality was that most of the top jockeys did compete, if they thought they were in with a chance of winning, and many left the UK as soon as the championship was over and chose to ride abroad outside the 'season'. It seems likely, therefore, that this change will result in the top riders spending less, not more, time on UK tracks. Is that what we want? Will that raise their pro-

file?

If a flat jockeys' championship, running for six months and ending on Champions Day, is a good idea, then surely a jump jockeys' championship, reduced to the core jumping season and ending on Grand National day, would also be a good idea. Yet, as far as I am aware, there is no appetite for that because, quite simply, it isn't a good idea and the jump jockeys don't have more lucrative opportunities abroad. They are happy to ply their trade in the UK throughout the year.

As I said from the outset, I love to try new things but I like to think that I am very objective in my assessment of my trials and I am very willing to accept when a new idea is wrong and needs to be scrapped. Rod Street and his team at GBR must also be willing to accept when they are wrong – they have had plenty practice – but the sad thing in this case is that a little bit of thought would surely have prevented this error in the first place.

Especially when you consider that the constant changing of championship criteria in recent years has probably played a part in destroying the relevance of the seasons that Rod Street is now so eager to restore.

## CHECKING OUT CHELMSFORD

FORMER racing journalist Rolf Johnson wasn't mincing his words when he gave us his personal viewpoint on Chelmsford City Racecourse two months ago and I wasn't surprised when their Managing Director, Phil Siers, sought the right of reply in Kickback last month.

I kept quiet on the issue as I hadn't been to the course since the reopening and so I clearly wasn't in a position to comment. I have been now and I had an enjoyable evening thanks to the exploits of Mister Rockandroll and the presence of two of his owners, Ron Huggins and George Tiney – it's always fun when you win!

I came home, re-read Rolf's piece, and concluded that, while he had used more than a tad of journalistic licence to make his essay colourful and entertaining, it was a pretty fair and accurate review.

Rolf chose to describe their new building as a 'bungalow' and Phil Siers came back with his definition of the structure:

"A circa 125-metre purpose-built, high-quality, state-of-the-art hospitality complex housing two lounges, two restaurants and sports bars". On the Chelmsford City Racecourse website it is called the 'grandstand' and that is one thing which, as Rolf Johnson clearly demonstrates, it is not.

I could not gain access to the second-floor club lounge which Mr Siers tells us 'offers 360-degree viewing across the track' but I paid particular attention from the outside to the higher levels of the building. As far as I can tell, you would need several people positioned around what appears to be a corridor on the second floor, dissected by pairs of swing doors, and even then I doubt if they could have a 360-degree view of the track between them. I cannot be certain without access to these upper levels but I can say for sure that neither the lower floor nor the centre-of-track owners' and trainers' room is designed for live viewing of horseracing or any other sport.

As Rolf Johnson says: "Should the racing have more than



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passing interest, you need to refer to proceedings on television, preferably the big screen across the course". I watched my runners from close to the winning post as I always like to see as much as possible of the race live, but the view is limited to the last furlong of each circuit.

Sadly, Chelmsford is not alone in this disregard for the need to watch our sport live. Some of our most established

turf tracks, such as Newcastle and Doncaster, are allowing trees to grow in the centre, blocking the uninterrupted view of racing which has existed there for centuries. They seem to think that most racegoers are happy to watch on a big screen but, of course, in this day and age most people have a pretty big screen at home.

Hence, the emphasis on racecourses has shifted to food and beverage and other forms of entertainment rather than seeking to engage the customers in the sport of horseracing. When judged on this scale, the facilities at Chelmsford aren't bad at all. They are bright, airy and modern and, in the small facility for owners and trainers, we were given sandwiches and soup – fare of a Sandown level, which is well above average, but nothing to compare with that offered by the likes of Ayr, Ascot, Chester, Hamilton or Haydock.

Rolf Johnson gives credit for the prize-money at the first two meetings and Phil Siers assures us that they fully expect to achieve a very high position in the racecourse meritocracy tables at the end of the year. Nothing is more important and, if Chelmsford deliver on this promise, they will surely thrive and will get due praise in this publication.

And, by the way, the JCB is gone.