



Creaming off the cash

THE issue of poor prize-money and inadequate returns to owners has blighted racing for at least as long as I have been a trainer. In Off The Bridle this month (p.16) John Scanlon takes another look at the situation but, if anything, I think he has been a bit hesitant in pointing the finger at those who are creaming off the cash rather than paying the players. I won't be so shy.

As John says, when he discussed his proposed piece with me, we soon got round to looking at the maiden Mister Baileys won back in 1993. For many years, whenever I have been involved in discussions about poor prize-money, I have stated that Mister Baileys got more than £5,000 for winning a maiden nearly quarter of a century ago. I have said it so often, and checked it so seldom, that I had begun to doubt whether it could actually be true. John and I checked and he did indeed win £5,921.25. It is hard to fathom and I couldn't help but think that this must have been a really extraordinary maiden race in its day but, as you can see from John's table, it wasn't that unusual back then. It is now.

I, therefore, decided to look at this a little differently. I've gone back through recent results looking for races that might have had equivalents running on the same track back in the mid-90s.

Comparable

With Easter being so late this year, the start to this year's season has been unusually delayed and this made it a little difficult to find truly comparable races but those such as Sandown's Classic Trial could not escape. The winner this year, Cunco, collected £36,861.50. In 1995 the winner collected £42,636. Our own Frankuus earned £6,994 for coming third but back in 1995 that would have been £7,686.90. So the much-perpetuated myth that prize-money has been loaded into the better races, resulting in paltry sums for lower grade racing, is exactly that -- a myth.

The cuts have come at all levels. Pontefract's Marathon Handicap is a race that has been around, pretty much unchanged, for a long time. This year the 2m6f event was run

as a 0-75 handicap and the winner was rewarded with £3,234.50. There were prizes down to fourth place and the fourth-placed horse received £250.40. Back in 1995 it was run over the same trip but was a marginally lower grade race at 0-70. Despite this, however, the winner got £4,045 and the fourth £265.

On the opening day of the turf this year at Doncaster the 1m2½ maiden offered a first prize of £3,234.50. Back in 1995 that was £4,171.70. The list goes on and on.

So why is it? What has gone wrong?

JOHN touches on it and points out that the fixture list has been vastly expanded. This was a trade-off for more money from the betting industry and, perhaps, wasn't a very good trade if you look at it on a per-race basis. But the betting industry would argue that, between levy and picture rights money, they have been paying far more per race than they did back in 1995 and they have a fair point. But the extra clearly isn't filtering through to prize-money. The

difference, as most of you will know, is that levy payments to racecourses were required to be paid out, in their entirety, as prize-money. Whereas media rights money goes to the

racecourses to use as they see fit. They want a pat on the back if they put a third into prize-money and a gong and a gold medal if they stretch to 50%. The arithmetic isn't complicated.

Furthermore, back in 1995, the vast majority of races were run for a prize-money pot 'added to stakes'. Now, virtually all our races are run as guaranteed sweepstakes i.e. a fixed prize pot regardless of what is accumulated in entry fees. Thus, that Doncaster maiden race back in 1995 was described as a £4,000 race but the winner actually received £4,170.70 and the first four shared a total of £6,290. Nowadays the winner of a £4,000 race gets just under £2,600.

So, the question we all should be asking about the latest 'windfall' from the new betting right is not, how will it be distributed? But rather, who will distribute it? And, how much will they keep for themselves?

“ The question about the new betting right money is not how it will be distributed, but who will distribute it? ”

LUDICROUS

IT HAS been a dry winter and that has meant that we have already, before April was out, seen problems through injudicious watering of tracks. It seems clear that many, if not most, Clerks of Courses are ignoring BHA guidelines which instruct them to aim for good-firm ground for flat racing and are, in fact, aiming for a ground description without the word 'firm' in it.

It isn't all their fault, as I have said so often before. They know that they will get far more non-runners if the ground goes to firm and so they water to avoid that at all costs – they aim for good and would rather have good-soft or even soft (two or three points away from optimum) than firm (one point away from optimum).

The only answer is to change the way going is described and take the official description of going away from Clerks. It is ludicrous to have someone with such an axe to grind giving the 'official' going report.



WHEN COMPARING races from 1995 with those from today, there was one track that stood out as invariably having improved the prize-money on offer. That, no doubt, has something to do with how bad it was then but Musselburgh, or Edinburgh as it was called back in the 90s, is surely the most improved racetrack in Britain in terms of facilities and quality of racing on offer.

I have to admit that, in the early days of my training career, I wouldn't have shed too many tears if Musselburgh had closed. It was the poor cousin to the other Scottish tracks. It is now a magnificent track for its size and sets the standard for small independent tracks in Britain.

Musselburgh is currently operating on a temporary licence (see Kickback, p. 6) due to a dispute between local councillors and the track management. The council have stated that racing at Musselburgh will not be endangered by this dispute but somebody needs to tell them that we want the kind of racing that Bill Farnsworth and his team give us now. Not the dross we saw at the old Edinburgh track.

Too early to assess stamina

IT is only now, as the tranche of Royal Ascot Group 2s come around to their closing date (May 2), that I realise the full impact of what they have done to the Queen's Vase.

As I have said before, to me it is ludicrous to suggest that cutting the distance of the Queen's Vase, or any other race for that matter, is part of a move to promote stayers. It surely cannot do anything other than favour those who have less stamina. But, perhaps, the raising of the race from Listed to Group 2 status is also going to work against the true stayer because, with that move, comes an early closing date and a cost to run of £1,500, up from £450 last year.

The prize-money, of course, has risen by 66% to £150,000 but the entry fee has risen by 233%. However, it is not the cost of the entry so much as the timing of the entries that will be a blow for some emerging stayers. Until this year,

the Queen's Vase has closed just six days before the race with a single payment of £450 to run. Even at that late stage, I must confess, I was often unsure as to which of my horses might possess the necessary stamina for the Vase and it was not uncommon for me to have horses entered in the King Edward VII and then decide that they were better suited to two miles just a few days before the race. And for some of those that were only climbing the ranks in the run-up to the Royal meeting, as is common with slower maturing staying horses, they were entered in the King George V Handicap and the Queen's Vase and a decision made at the last minute.

Now the race closes on May 2 when no Listed or Pattern race has been run for three-year-olds in the UK beyond 10 furlongs. The first payment, on that date, is £510 and this is followed by another stage payment of £600 not long afterwards on May 23.



And Beyond (left): Mark's first of six Queen's Vase winners

Many horses who are currently being thought of as potential Derby candidates and/or possibles for the Group 2 King Edward VII on the same day as the Queen's Vase and over just 400 metres less, might now be entered in the Vase. But will the ones who needed support, the true stayers who are not being thought of as Classic horses at this stage, be entered? Some will, undoubtedly, be missed out.