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Off the bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

IN the aftermath of Royal Ascot, attention has once again focussed on the viewing figures achieved by ITV for their coverage of the royal meeting. With the plethora of winners enjoyed by the yard in June, I haven't had the chance to analyse them in detail as yet, but my broad impression is that they are better than those achieved by Channel 4 last year, but not as good as the figures achieved by the BBC in years gone by.

One suggestion caught my eye, however, which I think is a terrific idea. Writing in his Monday column in the Racing Post on June 26, Lee Mottershead came up with the suggestion that ITV might wish to switch The Opening Show from Saturday mornings to Friday nights.

Now I don't know about you, but I'm far too busy to

spend much of my precious weekend time in sitting down in front of the television to watch sport. The Six Nations weekends involving three live rugby matches are something of an exception, but if I'm going to make an effort to watch some racing on a Saturday afternoon, I can't afford to be sitting watching the box early on Saturday too.

I think Mottershead is to be congratulated on an excellent idea, and, who knows, having learned a bit about Saturday's racing offer on Friday nights, perhaps some viewers might make plans to go racing, or at least have a bet when they have a bit more time to think about it. And in this age of digital technology, there's nothing to stop the Saturday dihard's actually watching the programme on Saturday mornings.

WHILE it seems churlish to pick faults in what was another brilliant Royal Ascot, it beggars belief that sectional timing is not available at the course. As James Willoughby has demonstrated time and again in his contributions to this magazine, there is a huge amount to be gained from a proper, scientific analysis of races and individual performances within a race.

Information as to the times recorded by each runner should be available as a matter of course. The technology is patently available and there is no good reason as to

why it is not in use.

Ascot has done much to draw runners from around the world to the meeting to add to the spectacle and the intrigue of its top-quality racing. Connections of those runners must be bemused that there are no official time records to let them analyse how their horses fared throughout a race.

And though I'm hardly the punter's pal, it seems only right to me that those investing in our sport, albeit indirectly, are entitled to as much objective information as we can reasonably give them.

HAVING been on holiday in Italy during much of Royal Ascot week, I was particularly eager to read all about Permian's win in the King Edward VII Stakes on Friday and Oriental Fox's Queen Alexandra win in the Racing Post on my return.

A friend had bought me a copy of the paper on each day of my absence, and, desperate to read all about Permian's win I grabbed Saturday's paper from the pile to 'read all about it', as Professor Green might say. Skipping past the 'royal' cover page I suppose I expected some reference to Permian's win by page 4 or 5.

I was disappointed, though somewhat intrigued as to why someone would throw a pint of lager at Andrea Atzeni. Still no reference to it by page 9, though there was a nice pic of Phil and Holly from This Morning in their Ascot finery, with a caption pointing out they were on hand to present the

trophy for the King Edward VII Stakes.

By page 15 I was starting to leaf back through the pages I'd scanned, thinking I must have missed the coverage, but no. Cracking on, I passed by the Richard Hughes and FreddyTylicki columns, the ads for Ladbrokes and Sporting Index and then, on page 27, I saw my first reference to the win. Mark's line "It's a bit of a relief just to get on the scoresheet" was flagged up as Quote Of The Day in the Day At A Glance feature. To my relief, I then found a report of the race, at the bottom of page 29. Ho hum!

I appreciate that the Post's Saturday edition, especially during Royal Ascot, is a bumper one and that preview and betting features can be readied in advance and slotted into the paper early. But if racing's trade paper thinks a report on the Ascot Derby can wait to page 29, what would it take to make front page news? BBN, again? (Betting Before Narrative?)

Iwonder how many of our readers found themselves fascinated by James Willoughby's article on riding tactics which we published last month in the particular context of this year's Derby?

Presciently, James wrote: "Lengths gained in the final furlong are often the cheapest." Wings of Eagles' late swoop proved his point to perfection.