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"If it ain't broke . . ."

IT might seem at times that I am overly critical of the initiatives to promote 'stayers' in Britain but I can assure you that I am firmly in favour of the principle. I cannot help, at times, but be critical of some of the methods used but I am, overall, fully supportive of the objective.

I was, and remain, very much in favour of the new Weatherbys Hamilton £1 million bonus for a horse that can win either the Sagaro Stakes, the Ormonde Stakes, the Yorkshire Cup, or the Henry II stakes, and then go on to win the Ascot Gold Cup, Goodwood Cup, and Lonsdale Cup. It is a tall order, but so it should be and I know it is achievable. It inspires me and makes me want to look for more suitable horses, and one of my owners has already set it as his long-term objective.

It will, of course, take a considerable amount of time to change the mindset of breeders. To do that we must increase demand for the staying-bred horse and that is always going to be

difficult when costs of keep and training are so high and returns from prize-money are so low. Yearlings with middle-distance pedigrees still dominate the top end of the market but below that level there is a rapid shift towards speedier, more precocious, types which may not give any greater chance of a return but, at least, tend to show their ability, or lack of it, in their first season in training.

However, in a country where we race as much for resale value as for prize-money itself it is possible to create demand for the more 'stoutly' bred animal. I get the feeling that we are already seeing some shift in popularity with more races over longer distances available, offering more prize-money, and attracting respectable numbers of runners.

This is, surely, the simplest and easiest way to promote staying horses – just put on more races and more prize-money for them. The plethora of Chesham-rules races, run over as little

as seven furlongs, where eligibility is based on the winning distance of the sire – not even the winning distance of the sire's progeny – are a complete waste of time; the ludicrous proposal to increase the value of the Cesarewitch to £1 million looks like nothing more than a publicity stunt; and the reduction in the distance of the Queen's Vase was the strangest move ever made in the name of promoting stamina.

Entries for the Queen's Vase close this week and are a stark reminder of the way in which racecourses can manipulate the conditions of a race to make it appear that they are boosting the opportunities for, and returns to, a particular group of horses when, in fact, they are actually stifling ambition. Last year, Ascot made much of the fact that they were raising the grade of the Queen's Vase from Listed to Group 2 and the total prize fund rose from £90,000 to £161,250. This was dressed up, just as Jockey Club Racecourses have done with their £1m Cesarewitch, as a boost for stayers, but a closer look at the detail of the changes shows who paid.

In 2016 the £90,000 Queen's Vase closed six days prior to the race and 25 horses were entered at a cost of £450 each. Total £11,250. That is 12.5% of the total prize fund and Ascot were left to find £78,750 from their other sources of income. Eighteen ran. In 2017 the race closed at the beginning of May and 78 entered at a cost of £510 each, 63 of those paid £600 to stay in at the next forfeit stage, 23 paid £390 six days before the race, one supplemented at a cost of £12,750, and 13 ran.

So, in 2017 owners contributed £86,550 or 54% of the £161,250 prize fund.

Ascot had to find £74,700 from other sources, £4,050 less than when it was a Listed race. Was this a boost for the Queen's Vase and staying races? It doesn't look like it to me.

Ascot might try to argue that the end justifies the means as the 2017 winner Stradivarius went on to win the Goodwood Cup and finish third in both the St. Leger and the British Champions Long Distance Cup. But the second horse in 2016 won the St.



Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed's Hartnell was Mark's seventh winner of the Queen's Vase

Leger and the 2012 and 2013 winners of the Queen's Vase each went on to win the following year's Ascot Gold Cup.

In short, the Queen's Vase wasn't broken and they haven't fixed it. The only thing that needed to be done was to reverse the

senseless 2014 downgrading from Group 3 to Listed status.

In 2018 the prize fund rises to a whopping £200,000, but the entry fees rise too with that first stage jumping to £700. It will be interesting to see just how much more, or less,

Ascot need to find to meet this apparent boost to the race. I'll be watching this and also looking out for the entry conditions of the new Cesarewitch.

Who wants to be a millionaire?

CAN you imagine a horse too good to run in a £1 million race? I know it sounds ridiculous, it is ridiculous; but that will be the case when Jockey Club Racecourses introduces its £1 million Cesarewitch from 2020. Horses rated more than 110 will not be eligible to run.

What, exactly, is the objective? There was a lot of talk about promoting staying races and owners keeping horses in training for longer, but the Cesarewitch fills every year. So they aren't going to get more runners. And they aren't going to improve the quality by much as the lowest rated top-weight in the last five years is 103.

£750,000 for a maximum increase in class of 7lb doesn't seem like a very good idea to me. But, of course, it isn't going to cost Jockey Club Racecourses £750,000 and it isn't going to bring £750,000 of new money into the sport. Along with the rise in prize-money comes a hike in entry fees from 0.5% to 1.25% and they haven't told us yet how they are going to structure those entry

fees. If they are true to form there will be early stages meaning that, while the 36 runners pay £12,500 each (that's £450,000 of the pot), there might be many more who paid a lesser amount at an early stage.

I hope this isn't another con like the sales races and the Weatherbys Super Sprint, where owners are putting up the vast majority of the money, but I fear that it might be.

It strikes me that the announcement came when it did, in early April, to try and steal some of the thunder from York's £1 million Ebor, but that race will be a very different kettle of fish. For a start, the entry fees remain at 0.5%, as they should. There will be no cap on the quality of horse and every chance that this can turn into a Melbourne Cup-style race with horses coming from around the globe. There is still the issue of it being a handicap and the question of whether horses, racing for such a prize, should have to give weight to others, but even the current Ebor is such a high-class race

that the weight band is narrow. Some similarly structured races in the USA and the Melbourne Cup itself have Group 1 status.

That the winner of the Ebor gets no 'Black Type' at all, while a horse trailing in third in a Listed race does, is also more than a little ridiculous but that is no fault of the Ebor or York racecourse – it is the 'Black Type' system that is flawed.

So, as you can see, I am a great supporter of the £1 million Ebor and I am not impressed by the cheap imitation Cesarewitch. And, by the way, before those idiots with the lottery mentality start bleating about big value handicaps giving small owners and trainers a chance of winning a big prize, just remember which trainer has won the Cesarewitch more than any other in, at least, the last 30 years. Only two trainers have won more and they were both in the 19th century. Sadly, I might not be winning it again if they turn it into a rip-off race that extracts entry fees from owners for the gratification of the racecourse.