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## Good to hear Simon's views on problems of handicapping

**T**HE DEBATE over small fields and the congested fixture list rages on, with more suggestions of ways to solve the problem than you'll see runners on a whole day's racing at Southwell. But Simon Holt, writing in the Racing Post Weekender, takes a novel approach to the issue.

He, at least in part, sees the structure of the individual races, rather than the number of them as being at the root of the problem and he states that 'British racing is completely hidebound by the handicap system which renders some races – particularly at the 0-60/0-70 level – almost impenetrable for punters'.

'So why not try something positive by introducing a few races with completely different conditions of entry and see how they perform?' he asks. 'Some races' he suggests 'could be based on prize-money won, with the

highest earners conceding weight'. Or 'another possibility is that weights could be constructed according to the class of race a horse has won'.

Now I'm not sure just how much effect Simon's suggestions would have on field sizes, especially in the short-term, and, if it was restricted to a few races, as he suggests, with our racing still dominated by the handicap system, then it is highly likely that these conditions races might attract even smaller fields. But it is a breath of fresh air to

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hear that someone else shares some of my views on the handicap system.

I have said for many years that the only beneficiary of the handicap system is the betting industry and, when I was asked to sit on a handicap review

committee a couple of years back, I hoped we would look at alternatives and/or some radical changes along the lines that Simon Holt is suggesting, with graded races or weights determined by a wholly objective system such as one based on prize-money won.

Unfortunately, however, it is not only the principal beneficiary and the official handicappers who support the status quo. Many of my fellow trainers, most pundits, and a majority of punters (the latter because the idea has been sold to them by the bookies for 50 years) say they like handicaps and think that 'it gives the small man a chance' – a fat chance, if you ask me!

It is a similar mentality to that which drives people to buy lottery tickets in the belief that it is the only way they could change their lives or achieve their ambitions, and it is a mentality which is certainly holding British racing back.



*Congratulations to my son Angus, 19, who has recently been granted a private pilot's licence. Having completed his first year in Business Enterprise at Strathclyde University, he'll be looking to clock up plenty of flying hours during his summer break.*

## The reasons why I can't support campaign for lower weights

**A** FEW weeks ago, Jimmy Quinn called me seeking support for his campaign to have weights lowered in some races and/or handicap ranges expanded to provide more opportunities for lightweight jockeys. He said that he had the support of all the leading jockeys and I know that the Professional Jockeys Association took a similar stance for many years through Dale Gibson who also wanted to keep weights low. I had to tell Jimmy that I could not agree with him or offer my support. Clearly, for some reason, Jimmy is not getting the number or quality of rides that he has been used to in recent years and that is a pity, but with lightweight Paul Hanagan taking the Flat championship twice in the last four years, Silvestre De Sousa right up there and my own two principal riders, Joe Fanning and Franny Norton, being capable of doing the minimum weight, I cannot agree that there is any disadvantage to being light for a jockey today.

There are far too many jockeys whose careers have been limited, and even their health compromised, by their

struggle to make the weight and I think most of us would agree that, if anything, weights need to be raised a bit. It was recently announced that the St Leger is one of 140 Pattern or Listed races where the weights are to be raised 11lb, 21lb or 31lb with the aim being to have fillies in these races carrying a minimum of 8st 12lb, as some riders were finding it difficult to do lighter weights. That, surely, makes sense. Only a few years ago all handicaps for 4-year-olds and upwards were framed with a top weight of 10st and weights were raised to a minimum of 9st 10lb at declaration stage. All 3yo-only handicaps had a top weight of 9st 10lb, and all 2yo handicaps had a top weight of 9st 7lb. Now many handicaps have lower top weights and that came about when handicap ranges were narrowed and Dale Gibson and the PJA lobbied, as Jimmy Quinn is doing now, for more opportunities for lightweight jockeys. It never made sense to me when we all know that people are getting bigger and too many good jockeys' careers have been ended prematurely by weight problems.

## Loss of Warwick and a diabolical mess

**I** AM not one of those who is going to mourn the loss of Warwick for Flat racing. Nor am I concerned about the loss of six fixtures, which will be converted to jumps, although that will do nothing to reduce the glut of racing which extends across both codes.

What does concern me is that here we see, once again, that the racecourses believe that having a fixture at one track gives

them a right to race on that day, or another day of their choice, on that track, or any other track in the country and on any surface under any code of racing.

The precedent has already been tested by ARC with fixtures from Folkestone and Hereford and by many others on a smaller scale. It has to be wrong.

The fixture list and race planning is clearly in a diabolical mess and in the wrong hands.

## WHAT'S TO QUESTION?

**W**HEN GRIGOLO won the nursery handicap on the final day of Goodwood I was, apparently, called to the weighing room. I was doing an interview on Racing UK and didn't hear the call so, when Deirdre went to collect the saddle for the next runner, the stipendiary steward collared her and asked if we could 'explain the improvement in Grigolo's form'.

Improvement in form? Grigolo, along with six of the other eight runners, was having his first run in a handi-

cap and he got up to win by a length and a half with three lengths covering the first six home. Is it not the handicapper's job to give them all an equal chance of winning, especially when running in a handicap for the very first time?

Did Grigolo need to improve to win? No doubt it will be assumed that he has, and his rating will be raised, as is the case in virtually every handicap race run, but I can't see why the stewards would need to question the performance.

## Weighty matters

**D**OUg RAWNSLEY in his letter to the Klarion (see Kickback, p. 9), asks some questions about weight loss and I think the answers will interest many readers.

He asks how weight loss differs with length of journey, type of transport (e.g. aeroplane versus truck) and with age of horse.

I do know that weight loss can be quite considerable during transit, but much of this will be replaced almost immediately when the horse is given an opportunity to relax and drink.

For this reason we do not weigh horses immediately after a journey and our pre and post-race weights are done the day before and the day after racing.

We have also found that weight can fluctuate significantly over the space of a day – we once had a horse whose weight could rise as much as 10kg in the hour and a half of evening stables, presumably through a habit of drinking heavily and tucking into his hay at that time – so we always weigh between 4.30 and 6.00pm. If a horse is stabling over-night at a racetrack, it will be weighed the day before departure and on the day after return.

We consider anything above 10kg weight loss for a race to be worthy of note and investigation but some horses lose more than others for no apparent reason. Perhaps the most significant thing is the rate that the weight goes back on. We like to see the horses put weight back on as quickly as possible and I am particularly concerned if a horse loses further weight without galloping or racing.

I haven't observed any difference in patterns of weight loss between horses of different ages.

## Ps

**AT MJR we have always felt that owners should be compensated in some way for the disappointment of having a non-runner and so we have, for a long time, made it our policy not to charge transport or staff expenses for non-runners, regardless of the reason for withdrawal.**

**I was, therefore, intrigued to hear of the Nigerian e-mail writer who offered to compensate all those who had travelled to Brazil only to see their team knocked out. He just needs their bank account details and PIN numbers to effect the transactions.**