



Post's backward step

THE Racing Post is one organisation which has undoubtedly embraced the electronic age and it is certainly arguable that their website is advancing, in terms of both content and usability, faster than the paper version is declining, although this inevitably brings a shift in emphasis towards data and away from traditional journalism. Sadly, however, the website has recently taken a major step backwards when removing the facility to watch video replays of races.

Disappointed

This service was not free. It was pay-per-race or was available with certain premium subscription packages. I subscribed for myself and several of our team (seven subscriptions in all) and was deeply disappointed when the service was removed.

It has come about because the Racing Post has failed to agree a price for pictures with their suppliers and their attitude is simply to do without, regardless of the effect it has on their product and the way it is perceived by their customers. They did something very similar when arguing with the BHA over data.

Competitors

It is a strange way to do business and gives me the impression that they feel they are in something of a monopoly position with no credible competitors in certain fields. But, when they take action like this, they open the door for those who want to challenge the current status quo.

I have cancelled my subscriptions and will look for an alternative way of viewing replays. Maybe I will find something that I consider to be better than, or better value than, the Racing Post. If so, I won't go back.

Foot-in-mouth disease strikes

I'VE gone and put my big foot in it again! In Bletherings (my online blog at www.markjohnstonracing.com) on August 20 I drew attention to the DBS Premier Yearling Stakes, run at York's Ebor meeting, and claimed that York had made a profit on entry fees alone before any other income was taken into account. I was wrong and William Derby, the chief executive and clerk of the course at York, wasn't long in putting me right.

I was aware that last year the BHA had attempted to put a cap on owners' contributions to 'sales' races and high-value median auction races, at 75% of the total prize fund. I was also aware that some of the racecourses responsible for staging these races had not taken kindly to the proposals. I had assumed, wrongly on this occasion, that the racecourses had won the day as that is what I have come to expect since the courses assumed control of most things racing.

Surplus

But, it seems, on this occasion that the BHA were partially successful and managed to secure agreement for a cap on owners' contributions at 90% of the total prize-fund. They also ruled that, in the event of owners' contributions



The DBS Premier Yearling Stakes at York

exceeding that 90%, they could not simply be added to the prize-fund. Any surplus must now be returned, first to the owners of those horses which were eliminated by ballot and then, if a surplus still remains, pro-rata to those who contributed at the various entry stages.

What's more, York decided on this occasion to exceed the minimum 'executive contribution' required and actually put up £40,000 of the total £300,000 pot. The owners provided the other £260,000 (87%). So it is quite understandable that William Derby should wish to correct my error and I apologise to him and the York Race Committee for

and £112,500 (75%) of the £150,000 on offer in the Tattersalls October Stakes at Newmarket.

As you would expect, the racecourse executives and sponsors of these races don't go out of their way to advertise where the prize-money is coming from but they are quick to tell me that they have very few complaints. These races are popular but, then again, so is the National Lottery and, in this case, the 'tickets' are costing an awful lot more than a couple of pounds. In that DBS Premier Stakes at York, one trainer was responsible for more than £40,000 worth of entries. That makes my spend on this type of race pale into insignificance

my failure to get all the facts in place before venting my spleen, but I make no apology for drawing attention to the financial structure of these races or for asking what place they have in our race programme.

THE DBS Premier Yearling Stakes is not the only culprit. Owners contribute £190,000 (76%) of the £250,000 prize-money for the Weatherbys Super Sprint at Newbury; they put in £250,000 (83%) of the £300,000 for the Weatherbys Stakes at Doncaster; £130,000 (87%) of the £150,000 for the 2yo Trophy at Redcar;

but I still find it difficult to justify. My policy is always to spell out the full financial picture for our owners, along with an estimate of our chances of winning, and leave the decision on entry to them.

We have done well in these races but our own success would not make me willing to condone them or kid myself that they are good for British racing. They distort prize-money tables, especially for sires; they detract from Pattern races that are run on the same card or around the same time; and, above all, they take more money from owners to run the racing that others profit from.

THE yearlings sale season is upon us, before we have even had a chance to think about the horses that must go to make room, and I already have nine 'in the bag'. It makes it the busiest time of year for me, as I try to juggle racing, which is still very much in full swing, and buying yearlings, but I do, arguably, enjoy it more than any other time of year. It is so exciting to look at the raw material and try to imagine which ones might be moulded into champions.

Of course, the horses I buy are not necessarily - in fact not usually - those I would come home with if money were no object. There is a limit to what I can spend, particularly as most of my purchases are on spec. And, even more importantly, I am a stickler for value. Ideally, when the hammer falls, I like to think that I would have

been happy to pay more.

This canniness, which many say is bred into me and my fellow Scots, means that I am rarely in a position to follow fashion, even if I wanted to. This will certainly have played a part in my developing a reputation for training stayers and, if you look at my purchases so far this year (detailed on page 18 onwards), you will see that I am already gathering a predominance of middle-distance pedigrees. But I have managed to buy a full brother and a half-sister to Group 1 winners and all my purchases have high-class individuals right up close in the pedigree, despite the price.

I'm delighted with what I have so far, excited about the prospect of buying more in the coming weeks, and already dreaming about racing them next year.

Putting first things first

YET another argument over the price charged - indirectly, by racecourses - for pictures of races, draws my attention again to the value of these pictures. Clearly they are very valuable and that must mean that there is a very significant demand for them on satellite TV, in betting shops, and online.

So why is it that the racecourses are still so dismissive of their value when it comes to showing them on their own premises to their own customers? There is still room for improvement in the way they distribute pictures of their own racing on race day (especially replays and alternative angles) but the coverage of away meetings can, on many courses, border on non-existent.

Oblivious

Some courses, after years of badgering by people like me, have greatly improved the coverage of away racing in Owners' and Trainers' facilities but they seem to be oblivious to the possibility that other racegoers might actually want to watch racing. They don't seem to be able to understand the desire to watch racing despite the vast sums of money they are now getting for pictures.

They appreciate the public's desire to watch live performances by singers and bands, they know all about the public's preferences for food and alcohol, and they seem to believe that television monitors are a good place to advertise their venue for weddings and hen parties, but they cannot appreciate that the public might like to watch racing - on a racecourse!