



mark@markjohnstonracing.com

Time to raise minimum weights?

THE Racing Post, it has to be said, has brought us some interesting stuff in August and raised some very important issues. Unfortunately, however, it has made me realise that, as my business has grown and as the flat racing programme has been massively expanded, I don't get time to read the paper in summer even on the rare occasions that it is worth reading. I have, for a long time now, speculated about whether the Racing Post was far more interesting on a Sunday or if it was just that I had more time to read it. I'll now concede that it is a bit of both.

Early in the month Lee Mottershead's two-page spread on

jockey's weights caught my attention. I read the headlines and scanned it to get the gist of what he had to say, but it is only now that I have gone back and considered it in detail. It was a good piece and highlighted all the important issues but, in just two pages, he couldn't really cover any of them in enough detail.

He touched on some of the history and told us that, since the turn of the century, minimum weights have risen twice: first from 7st 10lb to 7st 12lb and then to 8st. But, in the time since I

began training, they have been raised three times. The minimum was 7st 7lb when I started.

The article, very briefly, touched on the opinion of retired jockey Dale Gibson, now the PJA's executive director (racing), but there was no mention of the fact that Dale campaigned for years to keep the weights low. And it is less than two years ago since Jimmy Quinn contacted me, saying that he had the support of all the senior jockeys and was seeking my support for his campaign to have the

weights lowered. I couldn't give my support to that idea.

Before the weights were raised and handicap bands were narrowed, all 2yo handicaps were framed with a top

weight of 9st 7lb and, at declaration stage, the weights were raised, if necessary, so that the top weight always carried 9st 7lb. For 3yo-only races it was 10st with the weights raised to a minimum of 9st 10lb at declaration stage. When the minimums were raised and the bands narrowed, the BHB (as the BHA then was) bowed to PJA pressure and allowed racecourses to set different (lower) top weights to 'provide opportunities for lightweight jockeys'.

Those reading Lee Mottershead's article only needed to scan through the racecards in that very issue to see numerous anomalies. At Brighton there were three 3yo+ handicaps and they had top weights, none of which were 3yos, of 9st 6lb, 9st 10lb, and 9st 13lb. Why not 10st? We all accept that 4yo and upwards flat

horses can carry 10st. At Bath on the same day, the 3yo+ handicaps had top weights of 9st 5lb, 9st 7lb and 10st. At Yarmouth it was 9st 7lb, 9st 11lb and 10st. At Kempton 9st 12lb and 10st; and at Pontefract 9st 7lb, 9st 10lb, 9st 11lb, 10st, and 11st 7lb when ridden by amateur riders. Some tried to suggest that flat horses should be able to carry the same as jumpers but vet Des Leaden told us categorically that increased weight means increased fatigue and that leads to increased injuries. To my mind it shouldn't be necessary.

Different

Robin Mounsey of the BHA said that the weight differential had to be maintained and so, if the minimum weight was raised then the top weight must go up by the same amount. But he didn't explain why he thinks that must be and, in any case, I don't think he is right.

I assume he was referring to races between horses of different ages where

the weight-for-age scale might result in the younger horses being set to carry below the minimum but, elsewhere in Mottershead's article, it states that in Australia the minimum in most races is 8st 5lb except in some feature races. We would have to do the same. Some races would allow younger horses to carry less than the normally accepted minimum.

In short, there is still plenty of scope for a raising of the minimum weights in the vast majority of our flat races without any need to exceed the old maximums of 9st 7lb for 2yos, 9st 10lb for 3yo-only races, and 10st for all other races.

There is also scope to raise minimums in many races and narrowing handicap bands still further would be no bad thing. I have no doubt in my mind that the narrowing of handicap bands has been a positive step for the integrity of racing and taking them down still further might even indicate that we would all be better off if horses raced in grades rather than having the full range of handicap ratings.

Increased weight means increased fatigue and that leads to increased injuries

Getting it right on the going

THE Racing Post also ran an excellent, six-part, series on going descriptions and ground conditions. Again, it was only at the end of the month, under pressure to produce something interesting for Klarion readers, that I got around to reading them.

The first thing that struck me was Alastair Down's opening gambit in the second paragraph of the first article when he said: 'The state of the ground is the single greatest determinant on the outcome of a race'. Hang on a minute, I thought, that can't be

right.

As far as I am concerned, the single greatest determinant on the outcome of a race is the relative ability of the horses. In my experience there are many who consider jockey, track and going, among other things, to be the most significant factors in determining a horse's chance of winning, while I put the strength of the opposition well above all else. This is why I like to have several options for a horse, leave running plans as late as possible, and do my homework on the likely runners. I cannot understand the idea that a race can be considered a 'good opportunity' before we have seen the likely opposition.

The very next day, Graeme Rodway ('The Edge') supported my view and said going was 'not the most important piece in the puzzle' and I felt vindicated until I turned the page and saw that Pietro Innocenzi (also going under the title of 'The Edge') was saying that 'the going will always be the most important factor when it comes to form study'. Are these two people who share the same nom de plume, or contribute to the same column, but have opposing views? I rest my case on tipsters.

I was interviewed during this series and said that while I had great sympathy for the clerks of courses as there was no doubt



that the word 'firm' in the going description increased the number of non-runners, they were not following BHA guidelines, which state that they should aim for Good-Firm ground for flat races. The going scale should be changed so the optimum ground was called good. Andrew Cooper of Sandown emphasised all that is wrong with the current situation when he

The GoingStick, it seems, is considered a good guide to variations in the ground at individual tracks but most agree that you can't compare ratings from different tracks. How useful is that? It is like saying that a 'half' will be 50% of a pint wherever you go but the volume of beer will be down to the landlord's discretion. It is notable that very few trainers are even interested in knowing what the GoingStick readings are.

Under the headline of 'When The Going Goes Wrong', the Racing Post told us of the 1989 Portland Handicap when a hole in the ground caused carnage. Name the winning horse, trainer and rider. No points for the trainer. Answers next month.

said, 'we're trying to produce ground on the faster side of good and on the better side of good to firm'. 'Better'????? If the aim is to race flat horses on Good-Firm ground, which is the BHA guideline and so Good-Firm is considered the optimum ground, what is 'better' than Good-Firm?

MUCH of the problem, surely, lies in the nomenclature. The current going scale for flat races ranges from Heavy, through Soft, Good-Soft, Good, Good-Firm, and Firm, to Hard. And it was acknowledged in these articles that Hard is now non-existent. So the optimum, target ground lies far to one end of the going range. Why not change the nomenclature so that what we now call Good-Firm is called Good (optimum) ground. We would then have three going descriptions softer than optimum (Good-Soft, Soft, and Heavy) and three going descriptions firmer (Good-Firm, Firm and Hard) even if one of those was never used. The optimum ground would then sit in the middle of the scale, as it does for jump racing and, if nothing else, I think this would have a psychological effect.