Time to raise minimum weights?

The HE Racing Post, it has to be said, has brought some interesting stuff in August and raised some very important issues. Until recently, 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 PJAs’s executive director (racing), but there was no mention of the fact that Dale campaigned for years to keep the weights low. It is and it was 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 9st 10lb and for all other handicaps 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 BHA (as the BHA then was) bowed to PJAs 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.

Increased weight means increased fatigue and that leads to increased injuries

The very next day, Graeme Rodway (‘The Edge’) supported 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 that 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.

Getting it right on the going

The BHA media manager Robin Mounsey says: “The fatality rate in British racing has fallen by around a third in the last 20 years to 0.2 per cent of all runners and the most critical factor in this decline can be attributed to racecourses producing ‘better, safer ground’.”

With all due respect, how does he know? There are numerous very significant factors affecting fatality rates in British racing, and in all domestic animals, in the last 20 years, including earlier diagnosis of problems and treatment of serious injuries. I’d like to challenge Robin Mounsey and the BHA to demonstrate that the most critical factor is the state of the ground on racecourses.

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.

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.

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.