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Putting the horse first

HORSE AND HOUND magazine appears in my post every week and I pass it to Deirdre unopened. I must confess that I rarely read it but I happened to pick up a copy recently and was drawn to their 'Rare Breeds Special' feature.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust – an organisation which hitherto I had never heard of – keep a watchlist of breeds at risk, rating them from 'Critical' (fewer than 300 registered breeding females) through to 'Minority' breeds (1,500 – 3,000 breeding females). I would never have imagined that breeds such as Clydesdale, Highland, Shire, and Cleveland Bay would be on that list, and not at the 'Minority breed' end.

Apart from the shock at discovering that breeds, which I considered to be commonplace and to have significant roles to play, were endangered, there were several other points in the feature which were of particular interest to me.

For a start, why is it important to protect these breeds and maintain healthy populations? After all, they might be 'native' to this country but many of them, like the Shire and Clydesdale, were produced by man to do a job and that job no longer exists or is now done by tractors and trucks. Breeds such as Exmoor ponies might be considered to be, almost, wild and a product of their environment but most distinct breeds were a result of selective breeding by

man. It might be argued, therefore, that the population of horses as a whole should be allowed to evolve to meet the demand or purpose to which man puts them.

However, a strong argument for the maintenance of these distinct breeding populations is put by Tom Beeston, CEO of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, who points out that 'if we allow a breed to become extinct, we risk losing unique genetic traits

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Cleveland Bay	165	145	109	104	84	100	76
Clydesdale	727	876	972	1032	976	876	852
Dales Pony	505	545	489	442	347	325	273
Dartmoor Pony	849	849	798	671	576	467	442
Eriskay Pony	51	31	16	11	22	51	58
Exmoor Pony	723	756	736	778	725	676	598
Fell Pony	1101	1196	1165	1125	1054	938	794
Hackney	338	334	269	291	265	196	131
Highland Pony	1281	1436	1414	1318	1083	1003	889
New Forest Pony	4482	4678	3902	3306	2526	2279	1865
Shire	1230	1294	1298	1265	1234	1198	1156
Suffolk	136	142	133	145	142	165	133

Table shows estimated numbers of breeding mares

such as disease resistance and climatic adaptations. These traits could be essential for the survival of future generations'. I can fully understand that but the counter argument is that, by maintaining closed stud books and breeding for type or breed standard, rather than purpose, we limit the dissemination of the 'good' genetic material into the wider population.

He does go on to say that 'a proven function for a breed is the best safeguard for their future security' and, in this, I wholeheartedly

agree with him. A good example is the thoroughbred in which we breed almost exclusively for function and we continue to test breeding stock in competition and value them by results. Nonetheless, even in the thoroughbred, we have a very limited, narrow, gene pool – although it is quite massive on a worldwide scale when compared with the breeds on the RBST watchlist – and I cannot help but wonder what we achieve by keeping our stud book closed. If a non-thoroughbred horse, or an unregistered horse from a lost or divergent line, was ever able to display the ability to compete on level terms with the modern thoroughbred, should we not welcome it into our breeding stock, as an out-cross, with open arms? Why did we close the Thoroughbred stud book? Was it for economic reasons or really with the best interests of the breed at heart?

It was also interesting to note that, while in some countries government recognises the importance of rare breeds and funds their protection, in Britain it is left to charities and the individual breed organisations. The biggest single financial contributor to the protection of rare breeds in Britain is the

Horserace Betting Levy Board and I assume that causes like this will be protected under the replacement scheme although there are times when I think that our industries – racing and breeding – and those responsible for their administration and governance would do well to remember their obligation to the furtherance of the thoroughbred breed and the future of horses in general.

Could the thoroughbred ever find itself on the rare breeds list? No, not so long as we are racing

them and using them in sport. But, if we ever stopped racing them, the breed might well be in that position in a relatively short space of time.

Unfortunately, those who seek to ban horseracing or make it less competitive, are unlikely to be reading the Kingsley Klarion and, even if they did, they are probably too intransigent to consider that, without racing, the thoroughbred horse would not exist.

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Sham

JOHN SCANLON doesn't mince his words, in his **Off The Bridle** column, on the prospect of racing in the streets of London.

I have, until now, kept uncharacteristically quiet on the subject as I didn't want to get egg on my face if they actually managed to pull off what seems like such a ridiculous idea. I didn't want to end up like those who said that Sir Gary Verity was a nutcase when he suggested that he could bring the Tour de France to Yorkshire.

But Gary Verity and his team put on a two-day stage more than worthy of cycling's greatest road race. That was cycling at its best with Yorkshire's scenery thrown in and showcased to the world. In comparison the proposal for city racing is a sham.

British horseracing is still, by the skin of its teeth, regarded as the best in the world and we should do everything to retain that position rather than funding a marketing department that seems to pull its ideas from Butlins variety shows. We have got enough races for grey horses, meetings restricted to female riders, and competitions between teams of jockeys with scant regard for the fundamental principles of professional horseracing.

I WAS not at Chelmsford on February 23 when racing was delayed after the first two races due to high winds and only went ahead after a course inspection, but I did have two runners and could see that conditions were bad.

I was, therefore, shocked to read afterwards that two trainers were fined for withdrawing their horses because of the weather conditions. Assuming that the horses were at the track then they could have been withdrawn, without penalty,

due to unsuitable going. If the trainers had realised that they would be fined, all they had to do was say that, in their opinion, the ground was unsuitable. I do not believe that the stewards would have the right to question what was unsuitable about the ground and, if Mick Appleby and Chris Dwyer deemed the wind on the sand surface, or anything else, to make the ground unsuitable, then they would not have been fined. But, apparently, once representatives of trainers (presumably not Mick Appleby or Chris Dwyer), jockeys, the BHA, the racecourse and veterinary officers have inspected the track and deemed it safe for racing to go ahead, a trainer cannot withdraw a horse for any other reason without

Chelmsford chaos costs connections

incurring a fine.

The 'law' in this respect is an ass and should be changed. Of course, there are those – plenty of them – who think we should, virtually, be forced to run all declared runners regardless of circumstances but they, invariably, have never had to pay to take a horse to the races. Even allowing for the fact that Chelmsford is relatively close to Chris Dwyer's base in Newmarket, it is very expensive to take any horse to the races and that is before you consider the cost of training it.

Owners and trainers (at MJR we do not charge owners for travel or expenses on non-runners, regardless of the circumstances) who foot the bill for getting a horse to the races which does not run have suffered enough without adding insult to injury in the shape of a fine. They have not, however, suffered as badly as those who went to the track that day and ran their horses in the six-furlong handicap, patted their jockey on the back, collected their trophy, and then were told that the race had

been declared void because the flag woman had raised her flag when she shouldn't have. The fact that the jockeys were oblivious to her error and carried on regardless to complete the race is of no consequence as the rules do not allow for any discretion. Again, it is the connections of the horses who suffer the loss.

There are many examples where the participants are left to pick up the bill for abandonments despite courses holding insurance against this eventuality and the public being refunded their entry fees. It isn't acceptable and owners and trainers should stand firmly behind Mick Appleby and Chris Dwyer if they appeal. Next time 'trainers representatives' are asked to consider whether or not racing should take place, perhaps they should put it to the BHA and the racecourses that, if they are going to fine those individuals who do not consider it safe or suitable for their own horses to run, maybe none of us should be running.