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Ayr today, gone tomorrow?

THERE is some criticism of the Ayr racecourse management in this issue (see Alasdair Ross letter in Kickback) and elsewhere over the abandonment of their three-day Ayr Gold Cup meeting, but I wouldn't be so fast to point the finger or apportion blame. Frankly, I feel for them.

We were among those who sent horses and staff all the way to Ayr, only to be told soon after they arrived that the following day's racing had been abandoned. I suspect that we are in a very small minority (perhaps a minority of one) who do not pass on the very significant cost of that to the owners.

Thousands

Owners, trainers and jockeys have lost out to the tune of many tens of thousands of pounds, and it might be argued that much of that could have been avoided if Ayr had been quicker to accept the situation and inform us

all at an earlier stage. But who can blame them? It is, by far, their biggest Flat meeting of the year and this abandonment will have ruined their year. Their accounts will not be a pretty sight.

It must have been hard to make the final call, knowing what it was going to cost them

So, it is surely understandable that they clung to the thinnest hopes. It must have been hard to make the final call, knowing what it was going to cost them.

I don't hold with the theory that this can be blamed on global warming and that it should have been planned for. I do fear that the turf on most, if not all, British tracks has been irreparably damaged over recent years by over watering and that this mismanagement might also have an effect on the subsoil and drainage. I have often criticised Ayr for their watering

policies and have wondered at times whether the watering system was run remotely by a groundsman living in the south of France. But turf tracks are not straightforward and predictable, and neither is the weather, and

incidents like this were occurring long before current watering policies were introduced.

I will never forget the 1989 Portland Handicap when a hole appeared in the

Doncaster turf and Bobby Elliott weaved his way around stricken horses and riders to win on our Craft Express. We'd never heard of global warming back then, or the BHA, or even the BHB, and the Jockey Club still instructed tracks that they must only water to grow grass and never to alter the natural state of the ground. That year, the St. Leger had to be run a week later – at Ayr.

ONE OF the most interesting things to

emerge from the Ayr Gold Cup abandonment was the course's decision to open their gates, at least to those with pre-booked tickets, and cater for them despite there being no racing.

I wasn't there and have not heard how successful that decision was. How many attended? Was racing from other tracks on offer? Were the bookies there and the other betting outlets open? Were the big screens on so that people could watch racing, as most do these days, from the stands?

Televised

It is an interesting concept and something I have been suggesting for years but it is dependent on the tracks being geared up for selling televised racing to their customers. Currently, most have scant regard for away racing.

They use the time between races to advertise their tracks

as wedding venues or to tell people about the concerts they have planned.

Some tracks, after years of barraging, now have reasonable coverage of away racing in their owners' and trainers' facilities, but I can't think of a single British racetrack that gives good coverage of away

racing to the general public. It simply doesn't occur to them that their customers, apart from the few die-hards in the betting shop, might be interested in watching racing.

Or maybe they think that too much racing interferes with the drinking time.



Racegoers enjoying their day out at Ayr -- despite the lack of live racing

Opportunity knocks

IN July next year Betfred's seven-year monopoly on pool betting ends and 54 of Britain's racecourses have come together to form their own pool betting operation. It is, to my mind, a hugely exciting opportunity for racing to take more control over its own destiny and funding.

The Tote has never been particularly successful in Britain, especially when compared to those countries where pool betting

enjoys a state-controlled monopoly position, but it is hard to say how much of that was simply down to hapless management. Betting exchanges have demonstrated that the

betting status quo could be destroyed with an innovative new approach and there is surely room for a good pool betting operator in that new market.

So, what we need is a good pool betting operator. The original Tote was hopeless and I can only assume that Fred Done's heart was never in it or that he was reluctant to build it when he knew that he had only seven years. As far as I can see it has been no

better under Betfred, and maybe even worse if that is possible.

I'm no expert and I very rarely bet, but I have been going into betting shops since long before it was legal for me to do so. I've attended thousands of race meetings and observed countless Tote sales personnel at work. It's like watching waiters who don't know what's on the menu.

SADLY, I'm not confident that the racecourses can turn that around. I've already said how poor they are at selling racing. They will need to start selling racing, not just at their own track but at all tracks, and they should have personnel who know what they are selling. Not only should they be able

to explain the different types of bet, but they should surely know what races they are offering bets on and, above all, what betting opportunity is going to come on the screens next. Currently, they haven't got a clue – just like the rest of us.

It would be unimaginable in any other form of sales but this total lack of interest in the product has prevailed through the privatisation of the Tote and six years of control by a very experienced, successful, bookmaker. Turning it around will be a mammoth task, but surely feasible for the right people.

The next question is, will the racecourses employ the right people or will it be another case of 'racing for no change'? The same old faces with new titles.