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NOTHING TO DECLARE

IF you have the remotest interest in British horse racing or breeding you almost certainly know by now that, from January 19, 2018, it will be a requirement, under BHA rules, for a trainer to declare if a horse has had 'wind' surgery since its last start.

I appeared on Racing UK's Luck On Sunday to discuss the rule and its implications and I have been widely quoted in the media since. I am sure you know by now that I am very strongly opposed to this ruling but I think I still need to set the record straight as to my views on 'wind' surgeries in general and the principle of publicly declaring when they have been performed.

Procedures

The BHA's rule is, in my opinion, badly flawed in many ways and not least because it includes 'epiglottic surgery' alongside procedures which alter the natural shape, size and function of the larynx. I have no concerns about surgery to release an entrapped epiglottis and restore normal function, but cannot see why it should be declared to the public any more than colic surgery or any other procedure to treat an ailment.

The other surgeries covered by the BHA rule (Tie-back, Hobday, Tie-Forward, and Soft palate cauterization) are a very different matter and, while their efficacy is the subject of constant debate, there is a strong argument to say that we should not be performing these types of surgery at all.

If they don't work or are unnecessary, why are we doing them? They are all invasive procedures and

must involve some degree of pain.

If they do work and are performance-enhancing, why are we doing them? We are very strictly prohibited from using drugs or any other substance that is considered to be performance-enhancing, so why can we use surgery to do the same? Furthermore, it could be argued that, if there is any genetic component to these 'defects' and they are performance-limiting, then we are perpetuating the problem by corrective surgery which enhances the animal's performance and so increases its value for breeding.

I raised this issue during my time on the BHA board along with the anomalies in the rules regarding tack used to alleviate 'wind' issues. Cross nosebands can be worn and don't need to be declared; tongue-ties can be worn and do need to be declared; spoon bits can be worn and don't need to be declared; nasal strips cannot be worn; Cornell collars cannot be worn. Tim Morris, the veterinary director at the time, accepted that the situation was a bit of a mess and said that, if he could start with a blank sheet of paper he would probably draft very different rules and permit far less, but above all he warned that we must not introduce

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rules on surgery that we cannot police.

I think he was absolutely correct and, as nothing has changed in that regard, the BHA should not be introducing this rule now. They clearly recognise that there is no hope whatsoever of them obtaining details of surgeries performed

before a horse enters training, particularly when so many of the horses racing in Britain were bred abroad, and so they have limited their ruling to horses which have had surgery since their last start.

This still can't be effectively policed as it depends on the trainer knowing and declaring that the horse has had surgery, and what type of surgery, since its last run. Recent issues over trainers failing to notify when a horse has been gelded shows that voluntary declaration isn't always guaranteed to be accurate and, while racecourse veterinary officers can usually (not always) tell when a horse has had its testicles removed, they most certainly can't tell that it has had 'wind' surgery.

The argument that this will provide enough data to eventually determine whether these procedures work or not is also badly flawed as there will be no controls (e.g. horses deemed to have the same abnormality having their performance monitored at the same stage without surgery), no way of knowing what improvement there might have been without surgery, and no measure or assessment of the abnormality before surgery. The data they do gather will be too limited and too riddled with subjective opinions to be of value.

However, it is the fact that the ruling cannot be universally applied to all racing jurisdictions and the fact that we will still have no data on horses

which have surgery before racing which worries me most. We do not know how many jumpers have had surgery, but we are led to believe that it is a very significant number and we have reasonably strong evidence to suggest that it is so widely accepted as being

worthwhile that the value of a jumper or a potential jumper is not affected by having had surgery. We also know that the value of a flat horse is severely affected by any evidence that it has a 'wind' problem and that the value of a stallion, and even a mare, would be affected if it was known to have a 'wind' problem.

I fear, therefore, that anyone who believes that these procedures work and that has an animal whose value could be affected by a declaration of wind surgery now has an incentive to do prophylactic surgery before the animal races. If this ruling results in flat horses being subjected to precautionary

surgery, as appears to be fairly commonplace in jumpers, then that will be, as I have said, a tragedy for the breed.

There are some similarities with my stance on the use of anabolic steroids. It was widely assumed that I was specifically against the use of these drugs and was calling for a worldwide ban when, in fact, I was much more concerned with the fact that we were not all playing on a 'level playing field'; there was one rule for us in Britain and different rules for horses coming from abroad. The BHA have made much of their stance against the use of anabolics and have claimed to be

leading the world in doping control, but they failed to level that playing field because, despite their claims of new and wonderfully accurate detection methods, they are unable to police the use of anabolic steroids in horses abroad.

THEY have gone and done it again. Jumped in as the great crusaders who will protect the punter, but failed to properly consult and, above all, take heed of the views of those who knew a bit more about the subject. The consultation process and the implementation of the rule was an absolute disgrace.

French racing acts on EHV

THE French have not, so far, made any mention of legislating on 'wind' surgeries but they have recently brought in a rule to say that, in 2018, it will be compulsory for all horses racing in France to be vaccinated against Equine Herpes Virus. This has serious implications for British-trained horses racing in France as currently this vaccine is not compulsory in British racing and many, if not most, British racehorses are not vaccinated against the disease. We do not use Equine Herpes Virus vaccine here at Kingsley Park although some of our horses will have been vaccinated before coming to us.

Abortion

I'll leave it to my veterinary team to give you more detail on the virus and diseases it causes in a subsequent issue but, in short, EHV can cause respiratory disease, abortion in mares, and a very serious, sometimes fatal, neurological disease.

First thoughts would suggest, therefore, that it must be a very good idea to vaccinate against such a virus and it would seem that France Galop, like their friends in the BHA, are inclined to legislate based on first thoughts. But things aren't always so simple and, unfortunately, that is

the case with Equine Herpes Virus.

For a start, the available vaccines aren't particularly efficient, even at preventing the respiratory disease, and they do not protect against the more serious neurological form. It has even been suggested recently that vaccination might make horses more likely to succumb to the neurological disease. Stables in which there have been outbreaks of the neurological disease have often been well-vaccinated.

There are also suggestions from trainers that vaccination is a cause of poor performance but I am not aware of any good evidence to support these anecdotal claims. The same was said about flu vaccination for a long time and probably had no foundation.

Overall, I hope you can see that it is not an easy decision to vaccinate and it could well be, if we decide against vaccination of the whole team, that our number of runners in France is curtailed. We will be taking advice on this and there will be more to come in subsequent Klarions.

YOU can, of course, rest assured that we will be aiming to make the decision with the best interests of the horses and their owners in mind. And all costs will be covered in our inclusive daily rate.