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Violence is no surprise

LIKE John Scanlon and Laura Thompson (see *Off The Bridle*, p.21), I was appalled by scenes of brawling and extreme violence at recent Goodwood and Ascot meetings. Like them, I was unsurprised. But, unlike John, I would hold the racecourses largely, and bordering on entirely, responsible. They have been building to this point for years. How long have I been referring to racecourse executives as ‘food and beverage men’?

Their obsession with selling food, drink and now music, ahead of racing has brought us to the point where a large number of racegoers – often a majority – pay little, if any, attention to the racing. And this is despite the fact that most racecourses are now, thanks to the sale of pictures, making a tidy profit on the racing itself.

Consequences

Laura Thompson and then Alastair Down blame much of this behaviour on the fact that racecourses have sought to attract a new audience by, in the words of the racecourse executives and BHA media gurus, ‘demystifying’ the sport but, in fact, it has been a constant dumbing down. In short, they have sought to attract a new audience to racecourses but not to racing. They have been very successful in doing so, and take great pleasure in reminding us that attendances at racecourses are up on previous years. Now we are all facing the consequences.

They make no real effort to sell racing to this new audience. I am constantly complaining about the failure of courses to show racing on the many televisions they have around their tracks. Few, if any, replays and scant

coverage of away racing. At a recent Newbury meeting I pointed out that, of the 15 televisions in their magnificent new owners’ facility, not one was showing away racing from Thirsk. At Sandown, they were covering the Chelsea Flower show when I wanted to watch Goodwood; and at Haydock, where they switched to cover away races moments before the off, we were fed a diet of cricket and adverts in between.

I do not choose to single out these courses because they are the worst offenders. They are not. They are simply typical, and recent examples where I have complained about the failure to cover away racing.

When I do complain, they are invariably very apologetic and take action immediately to ensure that there is coverage of all racing for those in the facilities for owners and trainers. But never do they grasp the need to sell racing to their other customers. They simply don’t believe that the public want coverage of racing and, to some extent, they are right because these new racegoers are not interested in racing. Nobody has sought to cultivate any interest in racing or sell the idea to them. They are too busy

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I think all racecourses have now pushed race conditions to small print on a couple of pages at the back of the racecard and, a few years ago, Ascot went through a brief period of omitting them altogether until I complained. They really don’t think the public need to know, or are interested in, why one horse is carrying 9 stone 5 pounds and another, in the same race, is carrying 8 stone 9 pounds. They want them to bet, but



Derby Day, and the only Epsom TVs showing of her race meetings were in the bookies

they think they can be inspired to bet by having racing colours with catchy logos and designs, team events, and novelty races. They want to make the race a blaze of movement and colour like a fruit machine -- a game of pure chance.

Jeremy Wray, the man behind the new Championship Horse Racing concept, recently wrote and told me that, while he is adamant that his races should be handicaps, the weights need not even be mentioned, apart from in the trade press, in order to ‘demystify’ the racecard. He really believes it and he has support from Jockey Club Racecourses and many leading figures in the industry. How many drunken brawls will it take to make them see the error of their ways?

Queen's Vase update

LAST month I promised you that I would be watching to see how much Ascot was taking in entry fees towards its further increase in total prize-money for the Queen’s Vase. I pointed out that, in 2016, owners contributed 12.5% of the £90,000 prize-money pool for the Queen’s Vase; whereas, in 2017, this rose to a whopping 54% of the new £161,250 pot. Ascot went from contributing £78,750 towards the race to a contribution of £74,700 while claiming to have boosted prize-money and supported young staying horses.

This year, they have raised the stakes again and offer £200,000 prize-money for the Group 2 race. But, of course, they put the entry fees up in line with this and continue to operate an early-closing system with a first payment of £700 to enter on May 1.

Eighty-three horses were entered at the first stage for a total contribution of £58,100 and 49 of those stood their ground on May 29 for a further £800 each. So a total of £97,300 (48%) of the total prize-fund has already been gathered with another £500 stage to come on June 14 and the potential to supplement at a cost of £12,750 on the same date.

It is of great concern to me that so many people have come to me in the last month and said that the figures I revealed were a shock to them -- and some of those people were industry figureheads who had supported the changes to the Queen’s Vase. Did they offer their support without considering, or perhaps even looking at, the changes to the entry conditions?

I have said from the outset that cutting the distance of the Queen’s Vase by two furlongs, and claiming that this was an effort to promote stayers, was a very strange move indeed. But it now seems likely that the supporters of this

move gave as little thought to the implications of changing the distance as they did to the entry fees and closing date.

Last year’s race was run over 1 mile 5 furlongs 211 yds and the position of the start, just before the tight bend out of the home straight, caused some issues with horses pushing for an early position. This year they have extended the race by 43 yards, presumably for this reason, but it still leaves it as only 2 furlongs and 43 yards longer than the Group 2 King Edward V11 Stakes (for 3yo Colts and Geldings) and the Group 2 Ribblesdale (for 3yo fillies). Forty-five of the 83 initial entries for the Queen’s Vase were also entered in the King Edward V11. Twenty-two of the 49 who stood their ground at the second stage remain in the other race.

It is also most interesting to note that there was not a single filly entered for the Queen’s Vase this year and no fillies ran last year. When run over two miles, fillies were regular participants and, of course, it was won by Estimate in 2012. She went on to win the following year’s Ascot Gold Cup.

It appears that it is now seen as being for the same type of horse as the King Edward VII and Ribblesdale, and fillies are being entered against their own sex rather than taking on the colts in the Vase. Further evidence that the race is no longer for the specialist stayer.

FAR from being supported by changes to the Queen’s Vase, staying-bred horses have been badly let down by the removal of the two-mile, six-day closing, Group 3 race from the Royal Ascot programme. Those who really care about promoting staying horses and/or purport to represent owners must face up to the fact that a mistake has been made and must press for the changes to be reversed.