



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

The true cost of training an apprentice

ON March 28 rule changes will come into effect which alter the percentage of riding fees and prize-money paid to apprentice jockeys. From that date, all apprentices will get 80% of their riding fees (previously 55% and 50% for 5lb and 7lb claimers respectively); 3lb claimers will get 90% of their prize-money and others will get 80% (all previously 50%). Under the new arrangements, apprentices will be responsible for all their own travelling expenses (previously the trainer was responsible for 50% of any expenses incurred for travel to the races). When announcing the changes the BHA stated that ‘the changes follow a 2018 BHA audit which suggested a number of apprentices were not having their travel expenses paid’

RIDING FEE SPLIT			PRIZE-MONEY SPLIT		
Claim	Jockey %	Trainer%	Claim	Jockey%	Trainer%
3lb	80	20	3lb	50	50
5lb	55	45	5lb	50	50
7lb	50	50	7lb	50	50

Current breakdown of prize-money and riding fees for apprentices

RIDING FEE SPLIT			PRIZE-MONEY SPLIT		
Claim	Jockey %	Trainer%	Claim	Jockey%	Trainer%
3lb	80	20	3lb	90	10
5lb	80	20	5lb	80	20
7lb	80	20	7lb	80	20

New breakdown of prize-money and riding fees for apprentices

Some trainers, in particular Andrew Balding and Richard Fahey, two of the most prolific producers of top-class apprentices in recent years, were outraged and I became more than a little outraged myself as statements from the BHA, the PJA, the Racing Post (Lee Mottershead in particular), Nick Rust, and even BHA chairman Anna-Marie Phelps, portrayed trainers as money-grabbing abusers of ‘vulnerable’ employees. As usual, they defended their castigation of the training fraternity with the claim that it was the behaviour of a minority which was making their intervention necessary. But it demonstrated to me, Andrew Balding, Richard Fahey, and many others, that the BHA, the

PJA and Lee Mottershead have no conception whatsoever of the economics of starting an apprentice jockey or of the costs of running racehorses.

For a start, the BHA’s method for calculating the average expenses per ride was seriously flawed. They based it on an analysis of six apprentices having had 899 rides between them and, although they assumed zero expenses for rides for the employer or at meetings where the employer had a runner, it didn’t, amazingly, occur to them that apprentices with an average of 150 rides per annum were not typical. Yes, their method of calculating the average cost of getting to the races was reasonable, but to then assume that this average cost was incurred by all apprentice jockeys on the same proportion of rides was a nonsense. In each of the 2018 and 2019 seasons, we had apprentices who were too young to drive when they started. Their expenses were zero. We had to get them to the races and that, on occasions, involved sending a vehicle and paying the driver.

I freely admit that I am one of the trainers whose apprentices have not been submitting claims for half of their travelling expenses when going racing. We have always worked on the principle that, when we are responsible for the transport, we pay 100% and, when they have to get themselves there, they should try to travel with a senior jockey or someone else who is going (we have runners at most meetings) or, if they choose to drive themselves, they pay themselves. I think this generally works well. The inexperienced riders don’t need to incur any expenses and, for the successful apprentices, it isn’t uncommon for me to fly them to, and between, meetings. I wouldn’t dream of asking them to contribute towards that.

But, as I said at the outset, this is not really about travelling expenses. It seems that many, including those who wrote to the Racing Post and, most surprisingly, trainer Mick Appleby, assume that apprentice jockeys are paid less than other members of staff of similar age and experience. I would argue that they are usually paid more and, in our business at least, they get their wages, and all bonuses, whether they are at work or away at the races and also being paid to ride. This means that, in my yard, the lowest paid, 16-year-old apprentice jockey, would be paid £42 per day ‘worked’ (before bonuses) whether that day was spent at my yard or travelling to and from the races. For our more experienced apprentices this figure rises to between £60 and £77 per day and fixed bonuses (i.e. those paid entirely by Johnston Racing and unrelated to prize-money or gratuities from owners) add another £9 per day.

The BHA say they took this into account but it is impossible to think that they have. I have spoken to a few apprentices since the announcement and it is clear to me that some – perhaps a very significant number – are not being paid if they are taking time off to go

racing or to ride out for other trainers. It can, of course, be argued that that is quite reasonable and the BHA’s apprentice agreement only stipulates that the apprentice should be paid full wages when attending statutory BHA courses. Frankly, I doubt that it is within their powers to insist that an employer pays an employee when not at work, off sick, or on holiday, but they claim that they expect apprentices to be on full wages whether at work or not and that they factored this in to their audit.

They freely admit that they did not take into account the cost of providing horses for apprentices to ride. Keith Dalgleish is the only one of our apprentices I can remember having his first ride on a horse I didn’t own. He was the only one I considered to have the skill and experience to do justice to an owner’s horse and give it a fair chance.

In November 2017 I bought Ravenhoe from a group of my owners, albeit for just 5,000 gns, and in the next 18 months he ran 31 times. Always ridden by our own apprentices or amateur jockey. He wasn’t the only horse I kept for the purpose. One of our apprentices who started in 2018 had a tremendous year and ended up with 89 rides. Forty-eight of those rides came on horses I trained but, much more significantly, 23 of the rides, the ones to get him started, came on horses I owned. I generally say that, on average, a run costs an owner £3,000 in training and running costs. I accept that the type of horse we keep for apprentices runs far more than average and surely averages out at less per run, so it might be reasonable to suggest that keeping and running a horse for apprentices to ride might cost, at least, £1,000 per run.

Some – including, perhaps, the BHA, PJA, and Racing Post – won’t even accept that and seem to think that trainers can keep and train horses for free so, maybe, just for them, it might be worth pointing out that, for those 23 specific rides given to that apprentice in 2018, the travelling expenses and overtime (not including any normal wages) paid to the grooms leading up totalled £2,548. The horse transport costs, again just for those 23 rides alone, were £7,536 (I’ll wait for the claims, no doubt from someone who doesn’t own a horse, that it doesn’t cost me that). Of course, I haven’t accounted for prize-money won but nor have I accounted for the cost of training, entries or even the jockey at 50% of the riding fee. I hope all reasonably objective people can see that this is a huge expense in comparison to any possible return.

Of course, that apprentice was not typical. In 2019, with our two mainstay apprentice horses having serious issues and being retired during the season, our two new apprentices got just 10 and seven rides respectively. One had his first five rides and only winner on horses we owned. The other had five of his seven rides on horses we owned and all of his rides on horses I trained. Those two apprentices have since left to join other yards where, presumably, they have been promised more rides.

It is little wonder to me that some trainers are so upset at the suggestion that they have been profiting from having apprentices and, in particular, the suggestion that there has been abuse of young people by employers. If the apprentice system has been abused it has been by those who make promises [of rides] that they cannot, or will not, keep in order to get staff. And there are those who are operating as

‘apprenticed’ to a trainer but who are not employed, or paid a full-time wage, by that trainer. I suspect that a similar situation may exist with Conditional jockeys, who get

100% of their riding fees and prize-money. I would be most surprised if they are being paid a full wage when not at work for the trainer holding the licence.

Andrew Balding and Richard Fahey have said that they will not sign any new apprentices. That alone is a huge blow to those seeking a start on the path to being a jockey. I have not said that, but I am not going to spend tens of thousands of pounds on owning, training and racing horses for one or two members of staff to ride while the BHA, PJA, and Racing Post tell the world that I have been making money out of these ‘vulnerable young people’. To do so would be an insult to all those staff who do not get that opportunity and who are at home working while the apprentices are being paid the same and are away at the races.

I will continue to try to be honest with anyone who is looking to work at Johnston Racing and I will not make promises I cannot keep just to get more staff. We will not be keeping any horses specially for apprentices to ride and, frankly, without them, an apprentice has little or no chance of getting started in my yard unless they have a level of experience, talent, and competitiveness which makes it possible for me to put them on an owner’s horse and feel that that horse has a reasonable chance of success.

In 30-plus years, I’ve only encountered one like that. ■

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