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ELIEVE it or not, it is very rare for me to have any advance knowledge of what other contributors to this publication are going to write about. John Scanlon will occasionally canvass my opinion on something, but I generally want the views they express to be their own. If I disagree with something, it gives me something to write about here in Straight Talking. I am, invariably, the last to file my copy and something controversial in Off The Bridle can provide much-needed inspiration when I am staring at a blank screen.

William uniquely baffles us all with mathematical or statistical science, so his piece this month on the pros and cons of the Racing League and attempts to promote partnership among racing fans is a bit of a diversion and was a surprise to me. It was not, however, too much of a surprise to discover that, like me, he doesn’t exactly think the Racing League is the greatest thing since sliced bread or any guide to how British Racing might look in the future.

I spent quite a bit of time back in 2018 considering whether I wanted to be involved with Championship Horse Racing, as it was called then, and, after a lengthy meeting with Jeremy Wray and time spent studying the brochure in which he presented his ideas, I decided that I did not.

I made it clear from the outset that I could not support the series if it was to be run without whips. I could not understand why the BHA could allow a sponsor to dictate changes to the rules of racing. To me, it was ludicrous, and said a lot about those at the BHA who apparently were willing to let Championship Horse Racing go ahead as a series of ‘hands and heels’ races. They would never, presumably, allow a sponsor to insist that races were run without starting stalls, or that no horse should wear blinkers or some other piece of equipment that they might object to, so how could they allow a change to the rules on whips?

It seems they have done a U-turn on the whip now and Jeremy Wray said that was because ‘we didn’t want [the Racing League] to become a referendum on the whip’ which is surprising to me because, at the time, it seemed that his fellow director, Charlie Brooks, wanted exactly that.

Jeremy Wray also had a bizarre idea that, although all the races are to be run as handicaps, the public would not be told what weight the horses are carrying. He said that as they would all be running off their official handicap marks, those who understood the handicap system would be able to work it out, but he didn’t believe that the majority of people wanted to, or needed to, know. I wholeheartedly agree that the complexities of the handicap system and the basic principle that the majority of horse races are not run on a ‘level playing field’ must present a barrier to a large number of people who might otherwise become interested in the sport, but that is an argument for running races at level weights, not for running them as handicaps and not telling people. He may have changed his mind on that too.

But, above all, I believe that owners buy and pay for horses to run in their own name and colours and not for a sponsor’s ‘team’ headed by trainers or managers.

As James says, the team concept is already there in the Shergar Cup and I was a big supporter of that when it started with prize-money of £100,000 or more in each race and the jockeys wearing different coloured breeches depending on which team they were in.

The switch to team colours, along with the drop in prize-money, has ‘killed’ the Shergar Cup for me and my number of entries has been decimated. I don’t enjoy watching the races and the risk to our stallions fees and the knock-on effect they have on the price of yearlings, is all part of the racing dream for owners. The pinnacle for most British owners is to find themselves a colt good enough to be a stallion and the obsession with acquiring ‘Black Type’ for fillies is there for all to see as that extra ink on her catalogue page will make a vast difference to her breeding value.

Team events not the answer

STUD FEES: RESET REQUIRED

As always, it was hard to gauge the strength of the market at the yearling sales. At first glance it seemed that things were more buoyant than we might have expected but many breeders were losing out and it was more evident than ever to me that, generally, stallion fees are too high. Was there not a quiz question recently asking what was the most expensive liquid on the planet, and the answer was Galileo’s semen?

It is very notable that those stallions which shuttle to the southern hemisphere, invariably stand at a fee which is a fraction of that which is sought for the same horse when standing in Britain or Ireland. This is despite the fact that the resultant progeny will, on average, win far more.

I don’t know enough about the market in Australia and I don’t know what influence European stallions and their owners might have had on it, but I have a feeling that it is much more in line with the horses’ earning potential than is the case here.

This is all down to the fact that, here in Britain, we are racing principally for resale value while the other leading racing nations in the world are focused on racing for prize-money. The best chance, often the only chance, of getting a return on your outlay in British racing is to sell the horse, either for breeding or to a country where returns are more in line with the costs.

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It is a totally artificial market bearing no relationship to what the animals can earn other than by becoming breeding stock themselves and attracting an artificially inflated price for their semen or offspring.

Many were saying at the sales that stallion fees would need to come down significantly in 2021 and I was intrigued to see Highclere Stud’s unique 50/50 offer on their stallions, Cable Bay and Landforce. Half of the stud fee will be due if the mare is in foal on October 1 – the traditional date on which most stallion fees become due – but the other 50% only becomes due if the offspring reaches three times the nomination fee at public auction as a two-year-old. I wonder if anyone else

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Frankly, I can’t see, under such a deal, that many would be paying the full fee if selling their stock at public auction. For most of my time as a trainer I have used the nomination fee as a primary benchmark when valuing yearlings and I buy the majority for less than the cost of production if the breeder is paying the advertised fee.

I could, of course, be argued that these vastly inflated stallion fees and the knock-on effect they have on the price of yearlings, is all part of the racing dream for owners. The pinnacle for most British owners is to find themselves a colt good enough to be a stallion and the obsession with acquiring ‘Black Type’ for fillies is there for all to see as that extra ink on her catalogue page will make a vast difference to her breeding value.

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