



Mark Johnston's

No mystery about those small fields

THERE'S not just too much racing, there's even too much good racing. It might sound ridiculous but I'm afraid it is true and the situation is getting worse.

The fixture list has grown out of all recognition, we no longer have the horse population to service it, and the prize-money pool is being spread evermore thinly. There is a particular shortage of better-class horses, as the drain to countries where they can earn so much more money continues, and so, if they put on too many races for them, especially with inadequate prize-money, then owners and trainers are going to shop around for the best (easiest) opportunity and the inevitable result is small fields.

We regularly see the most valuable races on the card cutting up into small fields and the track managers scratching their heads and bemoaning the fact that they have so few runners for such 'good' money. They often blame it on the weather, the going, or factors beyond their control and choose to overlook the fact that there are better opportunities elsewhere.

The subject was raised on Luck On Sunday last month with particular reference to the previous day's meeting at Ripon where the two 'feature' races attracted only three runners each, with 50% of those runners coming from our yard. Nick fell, hook line and sinker, for the clerk of the course's claim that it was a result of the Good To Firm ground and his guest, Ralph Beckett, suggested that it might have been down to the fact that Ripon were not offering overnight accommodation for runners.

IT seems neither of them had read my website Bletherings on the day where I pointed out that, what they were calling 'good' prize-money, was actually truly appalling for this class of horse. The winners of these races, which were handicaps for horses rated up to 106, earned £11,338, to be divided among all connections. This will, like so many things, be blamed on the dreaded virus as the first prize for the two-mile race was down by 27% from the pre-Covid level of £15,562 in 2019. But why, from 2015 to 2019, had the winner's prize already been cut by 39% from £25,876? Overall, in the six years from 2015 to 2021, the prize-money fell by 56%.

Is it, therefore, really any wonder that only six horses turned up for these two races and that only two of them travelled more than 20 miles? Some of these horses could sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds to Australia and, even in this country, they can race for much more at other tracks. Themaxwecan earned £38,655 for winning at Musselburgh on his previous start.

Firming up on going descriptions

THE small fields in the feature races at Ripon (see item on left) were nothing to do with the ground but there is certainly some truth in the fact that, for some inexplicable reason, many owners and trainers are shying away from running their horses whenever the word 'firm' appears in the going description. This is despite the fact that Good-Firm ground is supposed to be the optimum for Flat racing and BHA instructions say that tracks should aim to provide going that is Good-Firm.

We now see, on an almost daily basis, that clerks of the course are ignoring BHA instructions and watering when the ground is already softer than Good-Firm because they know full well that they will have fewer non-runners on, watered, Good ground than they will on, perfect, Good-Firm. I cannot help but sympathise with them.

I don't know how you change the mindset of the horsemen who would rather run their horses on, false, watered ground but it would surely help if the going scale was moved so that optimum flat racing ground (currently described as Good-Firm) is described as Good.

The current system is doing no service to the individual horses or to the breed.

Tactical considerations

ANOTHER subject discussed on Luck On Sunday which caught my attention was that of potentially requiring trainers to declare tactics. Heaven forbid! I'm not sure if this was just a topic that the producers of the show had dreamt up to stimulate debate or if it has actually been proposed. Surely not.

Is it required in any other racing jurisdiction? Gai Waterhouse once told me that she was fined for failing to declare a change of tactics when one of her horses made all and won having sat mid-field and finished mid-field on its previous start. It didn't occur to me at the time that that suggested that declaring tactics was the norm in that country. I find it hard to think that any racing authority could consider that an acceptable ruling but, I suppose, they might see it differently in Australia.

Straight Talking

Nick Luck pointed out that horseracing is competitive sport and posed the question, in what sport would you ever be expected to reveal your tactics to the opposition? He is absolutely right of course, but I'd go further and say that I don't believe in tactics in horseracing. At least, not in the commonly accepted sense of the word which applies it to suggesting where a horse should sit in the field relative to

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the other runners and when the jockey should 'make a move' or 'ask for an effort'. Attempting to apply such tactics, to my mind, defies logic as you have no way of knowing how fast the other horses are going to go and the horse does not have an accelerator pedal, gears, or even particularly effective brakes.

Tactics such as seeking out the fastest part of the track, however, make perfect sense but it is surely laughable to suggest that, if you have gone to the effort of walking the track, you should be expected to share your findings with those who haven't bothered.

Tweaking the trials

I'M not entirely sure what point John Scanlon is trying to make about the Guineas in 'Off The Bridle' (page 27). I thought at first that he was suggesting, by his reference to it being 'the last big two-year-old race of the year', that it comes too early, and I wouldn't agree with that as I believe it is intended as a test of precocity as much as class. But, reading on, it seems that he just feels that there needs to be more, or more meaningful, trials.

Unfortunately, trials are often unpopular with racecourses and the betting industry as they can be small fields and often have a short-priced favourite. But this is, again, down to the betting industry's obsession with field size and the racecourses determination to cater for that obsession as cheaply as possible.

IT is surely ridiculous to expect principal contenders for Group 1 races to go head to head for a fraction of the reward a couple of weeks before the main event. Trials should be about one of the principal contenders being put through its paces against a few pretenders and I think, if they were marketed properly and reasonably funded, they might be very popular.

'CRAFTY' BOBBY

I really loved reading Chris Pitt's story (page 21) about Bobby Elliott's ride, and fall, in the 1962 Derby and I particularly liked Bobby's recollection of the carnage unfolding and his comment that: 'The funny thing is that, in that instant when I saw Harry go down I thought, "Well, there's the favourite gone, I might win now"'. This inevitably brought back memories for me of the 1989 Portland Handicap when Bobby won on Craft Express. I can't help but wonder if he had a similar thought that day as horses on his side of the track started to go down. He certainly didn't miss a beat.

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From left: Charlie, Bobby and Mark watch horses exercise at Kingsley Park

