



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

Clarity on weight issues required

JIM CROWLEY has hailed the continuation of the ban on saunas in the weighing room, brought in as part of the BHA's Covid policy, as 'another step forward'. It seems logical to me, although I wonder whether some jockeys will still be using dehydration as a method of weight control, wearing sweat suits while running or in their car with the heating on full blast.

What I find totally illogical is that it has, for as long as I can remember, always been the Professional Jockeys Association which has most vociferously argued against any proposals to raise the weights carried, and it has even called for a number of races to have artificially low weights to 'provide opportunities for lightweight jockeys'.

That has never made any sense to me and I have had plenty of experience of using naturally lightweight jockeys such as Joe Fanning, Franny Norton and Silvestre de Sousa. Those jockeys haven't had any difficulty securing rides on horses allocated top weights and, in any case, as Jim Crowley and so many others have pointed out, there are fewer and fewer naturally lightweight jockeys around – for the simple fact is people are getting bigger.



It is also illogical to me that, rather than openly raise the weights and make it clear to everyone that the horses are carrying more, the BHA have chosen to give a 3lb allowance to compensate for the ban on saunas, on top of the 3lb allowance already in place for the back protector. So, a horse allocated 10 stone is actually carrying 10st 6lb.

In this era where the BHA are obsessed with transparency and want to tell the public if a horse is stiff after a race, gave a cough, or lost a shoe; or if the jockey used his stick once

more than is permissible, is it not surprising that they think it is reasonable to hide the fact that the horses are now all carrying 6lb more than the published weight? It is commonly claimed that the thoroughbred is no longer improving and that track records aren't broken as often as they should be but, while watered ground is often given as part of the explanation for this, I've never heard of anyone pointing out that horses are carrying 6lb more than they used to be.

WOULD it not be best to raise the minimum weight carried to, say, 8st 7lb and leave the maximum at 10 stone? This would show proper consideration for both human and equine welfare and would have the added bonus of narrowing the handicap bands and bring us a little step closer to a level playing field. Some will immediately cry that this narrowed weight range will not be sufficient to accommodate the full weight-for-age range over some distances, but surely an exception can be made in those cases? Older, stronger, horses can carry more, and/or some races could have a minimum of less than 8st 7lb if there is any foundation to Dale Gibson's claim that extra opportunities are required for lightweight jockeys.

Above all, make it clear what the horses are carrying. ■



Lightweight jockeys Silvestre de Sousa, Joe Fanning and Franny Norton

So just how often should horses run?

I WAS interviewed recently by Tom Byrne of the Levy Board for a project he is conducting to look to better understand how often individual racehorses run every year and whether there is room for improvement (i.e. an increase) in that across the industry.

With current concerns over the expanding fixture list and a declining population of horses and owners to pay for their training and racing, it is worth, at least, considering that an increase of one run per horse per annum from all those horses that have reached the track

would produce a 20% increase in the number of runners. If nothing else, this provides a great deal of food for thought.

The average number of runs per horse is just five and it doesn't sound too ridiculous to suggest that that could be increased to six. I wonder what the average number of runs is in other racing nations, for example, Australia.

One very interesting point in our discussion was the fact that I am perceived as being a trainer who runs his horses a lot and, indeed, I would say that about myself; but the statistics say that the number of runs per horse from this

yard is approximately in line with the national average.

We deliberated over why this might be and concluded that it was because we run the vast majority of our horses, and even two-year-olds that have shown very little on the gallops would be given one or two runs on the track. This brought it home that the figure of five runs per horse applies only to those horses that have had at least one run. Just how low is the figure of runs per horse in training?

THE same, of course, applies when we are considering percentages of wins or winners per run or runner. The strike rates that we attribute to trainers tell us very little about the number of wins or winners per horse in the yard.

Perhaps it's another job for James Willoughby?

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

WHEN Laura Thompson's 'Personal View' (p. 10) pinged into my inbox I was oblivious to the fact that there had been another drunken brawl at Goodwood. I was not, however, at all surprised to hear of more violence on racecourses and I was very grateful to Laura for bringing the issue to my attention. I was also very taken by her views on the subject and I thought I might dedicate this column, or even the whole Klarion, to the issue of how we are seeking to market racing and just who our customers and prospective customers are, or should be.

However, in Off The Bridle (p. 23) John Scanlon has beaten me to it. Clearly his memory on the subject is far better than mine. I had forgotten all about Brians and Bens. As he says, 'what a load of patronising twaddle'.

JOHN also reminds us that I labelled the Racing for Change organisation, 'Racing for No Change'. It was, in my mind, a play on words, a bit like Always Trying; offering ambiguity around whether I was saying that we were racing for no 'change' as in no money or whether I was commenting on the fact that there had really been no change in racing's corridors of power and we had many of the same people running and seeking to market our sport, but under yet another new guise.

Many of them are still there now. They are bandwagon jumpers, a bit like politicians, whose main objective is to keep themselves in a job and, following on this wave of negative press for racecourses which are selling music and alcohol ahead of racing, they are suddenly calling for us to concentrate on selling the fundamental aspects of the sport, such as the athletes, human and equine, themselves.

Even the new generation of Bens (and journalists with other three-letter names) at the Racing Post have been trying to seamlessly switch camps without anyone noticing. They too are now calling for us to pay heed to the interests of our loyal and dedicated customer base that goes racing for the racing and for us to try to expand that customer base.

BASICALLY, all the things that I, Laura, John and many others like us have been saying for decades.