



Mark Johnston's

WEIGHING THINGS UP

JIMMY QUINN once phoned me, not that long ago, and asked me to support his call for a widening of handicap bands and a lowering of minimum weights. He said he had the backing of all the senior jockeys in the weighing room. I now assume that such backing didn't include the senior jockeys – P J McDonald, Richard Kingscote, Adam Kirby, etc. – who are now up in arms over the BHA's



Jimmy Quinn

plan to remove the 'temporary' 3lb allowance, introduced to help jockeys when weighing-room saunas were closed due to Covid-19, and replace it with a

2lb rise in the weights.

It might surprise you that any jockey, even a lightweight such as Jimmy Quinn, would be calling for minimum weights to be reduced, but I had heard similar suggestions before. Throughout the time that I was actively involved with the National Trainers Federation and the BHA, whenever rises in the minimum weights were proposed, it was the Professional Jockeys Association and, in particular, Dale Gibson, who is now their CEO, who sought to block moves to raise weights.

I could never accept Dale's argument, which was similar to Jimmy Quinn's, that lower weights were needed to provide opportunities for lightweight jockeys, but he clearly managed to convince the BHA and racecourses who, to this day, still frame races with lower-

than-normal weights for this reason. It has always astounded me as I have encountered so many jockeys who have struggled with weight issues, and being naturally light was never a disadvantage to riders such as Willie Carson, Silvestre de Sousa or Joe Fanning.

The extra 3lb weight allowance was introduced when Covid-19 measures resulted in the closure of weighing room saunas, in order to assist the jockeys who depended on the sauna for weight control. It has now been decided that this method of weight control should be



Dale Gibson

RACING HAS long since ceased to be a hobby for me and I must confess that it needs to be something quite special to attract my attention these days if I don't have a horse running. As we have not had a jump horse for quite some time that has meant that, in recent years, my viewing of jump racing has largely been restricted to the Grand National and a handful of races at the Cheltenham festival. But, even if the Lingfield executive had failed to note the significance of Ascot's SBK Clarence House Chase and had not shown it on their big screen while the horses were milling around before the start of the Coral Winter Oaks, I had already vowed to watch the race.

The media had done a great job of promoting the clash between Shishkin and Energumene and had compelled anyone with so much as a passing

Quality counts

interest in racing to watch. We were not disappointed. It was a hugely exciting race with Energumene looking all over the winner until approaching the last fence and, even at that stage, I was being bombarded by a cacophony of conflicting opinions on the likely outcome from Lingfield racegoers all around me. They, like me and many tens of thousands of others, are already anticipating a rematch.

This was jump racing at its best and makes a mockery of the countless claims, including the BHA's recent assertions, that competitiveness and

interest in racing is dependent on field size and handicapping. This was a four-runner, level-weights, contest with an odds-on favourite and an 80-1 shot. It was, apparently, the highest betting turnover race of the jump season so far and, while it might have returned a lower profit margin for bookmakers than a 14-runner, class 6, 'egg and spoon' race on the Newcastle all-weather, this is what the racing and betting industries need more of.

IT is quality of competition that attracts public interest and stimulates opinions. Small fields and odds-on favourites are only a problem when they are indicative of a lack of quality and the drain of our best horses to race abroad for better returns, or when they indicate that there are far too many races for the available horse population.

Straight Talking

discouraged as it is deemed to be detrimental to the health and well-being of jockeys, and the saunas are being removed. However, the BHA have decided that the weight allowance, which was always intended to be temporary, must go and be replaced by an increase in weights so that there is greater transparency and less discrepancy between the allocated weight, as published in the racecard, and the actual weight carried.

The jockeys, it seems, vehemently object to this, and not just because of the 1lb difference between the temporary

scrimp on the back protector would be to remove it before weighing, as is done with the helmet. Presumably, as it is worn under the colours, it is deemed too difficult to weigh without it but, as the rules stand, we are giving a 3lb allowance for an item that weighs less than half of that and we are giving a very false impression of what the horses are actually carrying.

The BHA have opted to raise the weights at the top and bottom and have claimed that this is done 'in order to avoid any compression of the weight structure, which in turn would reduce the competitiveness of British racing'. That, frankly, is nonsense. Competitiveness is not increased by increasing the weight range. Surely competitiveness is at its greatest when athletes of like ability are competing against each other.

'We are giving a false impression of what the horses are actually carrying'

allowance and the new weight rise. For some reason that I cannot fathom they seem to think there is a fundamental difference between an unpublished allowance and a weight rise and that the weight rise is of no benefit to them. In making their stand, they have, in my opinion, drawn attention to the fact that, even before the Covid allowance was introduced, the system of weight allowances was flawed.

FOR many years now jockeys have had a 3lb allowance for their back protector and Flat jockeys have had another 1lb in winter for extra clothes. The logic, I believe, of giving an allowance for the back protector was to discourage jockeys from using inferior protective equipment and/or tampering with it to save weight. In reality, however, it just means that they can set their minimum riding weight 3lb lower and still have the same pressure to cheat to reach it. The only way to ensure that the jockey does not

I don't actually think there is yet any welfare issue associated with Flat horses carrying 10st 5lb or 10st 6lb in winter (plus helmet, crop, bridle, martingales, etc.), but there must be a point at which it does become an issue. If we want to avoid any question of a welfare issue and truly increase the competitiveness of British racing, we should really be leaving the top weight the same and raising the bottom weight a good bit more than that 2lb for the benefit of the jockeys. This was always the approach favoured by trainers when I was involved and the most common objection to this, apart, ironically, from that expressed on behalf of lightweight jockeys, was that the narrowed weight range could not accommodate the weight-for-age scale when horses of different ages were competing against each other, especially over longer distances. I always felt that we should simply make an exception for those races where weight-for-age took some horses off the bottom of the scale and these exceptions would provide those opportunities for lightweight jockeys that the PJA seemed to want. Unfortunately, in racing, as in many other walks of life, logic has to play second fiddle to vested interests.

SHOOTING STAR

SUBJECTIVIST, yet again, features quite heavily in this issue. This time it is due to the publication of the World's Best Racehorses ratings and his being rated the joint champion stayer.

But it was not only in those rankings that his dominance over the staying division was recently recognised. In Sky TV's excellent documentary, Dettori, the great jockey's father, who came across as being a domineering character from whom, even now, Frankie constantly seeks recognition, said of Subjectivist's performance in the Ascot Gold Cup: 'The only way to beat that would be to shoot it'. Praise indeed.

The great horse is well, but is not in training. At present the plan is to give him the whole of the summer off, hopefully turned out in a paddock, with a view to coming back next year to show the world's best stayers how it's done.



Subjectivist with Joe Fanning and groom David Hickin after winning the Ascot Gold Cup