



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

Blueprint deserves some thought

MEDIA COVERAGE of Peter Savill's blueprint for racing, which he has presented for consideration in a letter to the BHA, was reasonably balanced and generally far less divisive than we have come to expect. Perhaps this might have been down to the fact that, although the letter or, at least, news of its existence was leaked within hours of it having been sent to High Holborn, the names of those behind it – described by Savill as 'industry heavyweights' – remained unknown. Could it be that journalists, who might otherwise have been under a managerial 'whip' and obliged to take a certain stance, were left to judge the ideas on their merits because they didn't know who among their customers and

advertisers might have been involved?

I was still a little disappointed that some chose to ignore Peter Savill's fairly clear explanation of his group's ideas and brand the scheme elitist with, at least, one bluntly suggesting that it involves a shift in prize-money funds from the bottom to the top. As I heard it, that wouldn't be the case at all. As far as I understand it, the proposal is to initially balance up the race programme to provide the right number of races at



Peter Savill

each level in the hope of, in turn, balancing up field sizes.

The better horses (those rated over about 80) would, therefore, have far fewer opportunities to run but would be doing so for far more money. Their slice of the overall cake would be divided over far fewer races. Some might not see that as being in their, short-term, interests at all as some will win a lot more and many will win a lot less. Initially, the cake will be no bigger and this might look like nothing more than a redistribution of existing funds. But it would undoubtedly make for more competitive racing and a product that might be far more attractive to racegoers, television viewers, and the betting industry. Hopefully, that cake would rise.

The lower-rated horses, on the other hand, would be given more races to run in against fewer opponents and, if I understand it properly, for no less per race than they are racing for at the moment. What's not to like?

PETER Savill, of course, no longer holds any position in British racing's management or regulation structure and he was at pains to point out that he was simply giving an idea to the BHA for consideration as part of their upcoming restructure. The ball is now in their hands. Let's see where they run with it.

In any case, it is comforting to have Savill, who has no financial axe to grind, lending his brain to British racing's think tank. ■

IN ALL the debates we have about the structure of British racing, its declining horse population, and its consequential declining standing in the world hierarchy of racing nations, we are often urged to look abroad and see what others are doing that we could learn from. Where better to look than Japan? If we are still the leading racing nation in terms of quality of horses, then they are, in my opinion, the fastest improver and the country most likely to knock us off our precarious pedestal. There is so much that they are doing, and may have learned from us, whether it be their emphasis on middle-distance breeding stock or their approach to the rules on the whip, which is boosting their standing while we stagnate.

I have long admired Japanese Racing and so I was delighted to be introduced to Mr Kanichi Kusano, general manager of the Japan Racing Association's London Representative Office on a recent visit to, of all places, Chelmsford City racecourse.

NOW JAPAN SHOWS US THE WAY

I congratulated him on his country's recent successes in Saudi Arabia and Dubai and told him how much I admired their breeding policies and their solid financial structure which had brought them to a position where they could dominate the Dubai World Cup meeting (albeit that they were aided by the absence of Subjectivist!). He summed up the secret of success in one short sentence. He said: 'In Japan, the racing is for the breeding'. Touché, I thought. You learned that from us too.

I came away thinking about my time

on the BHA board. I am sure I heard it said on a few occasions that one of the stated aims of the BHA is, or was, 'the furtherance of the thoroughbred breed'. I thought maybe I had once heard something similar of the Jockey Club and that they might have a comparable statement in their articles of association or even in their royal charter. I came home and searched the websites of both organisations but to no avail. Was I wrong? Did they never have that aim or has it been removed from their articles and mission statements?

I WELL remember reeling at a statement by the then BHA director of equine health and welfare, David Sykes, who said to me that, 'our role is to provide product for wagering'. I imagine, and hope, that he brought that idea from his native Australia, where that might well be the case, rather than having had it instilled in him at induction when he arrived at the BHA, but it was of concern to me at the time that a BHA director



Shahryar wins the 2022 Sheema Classic for Japan

could hold such a view. I wonder what the current BHA executive see as their role, and whether it is time for the BHA to reconsider its vision for the future and the aims and policies required to achieve that vision. They might be able to learn something from the JRA or maybe, more simply, from the annals of British racing history. ■

NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH?

ANOTHER WAY of looking at the drain of talent from British racing and the reduction in quantity and quality in the horse population is to say that we lack sufficient owners who are willing or able to keep horses in training in Britain.

In the medium to long term we can hopefully begin to address the funding issues which contribute to this but, in the short term, there is so much more that could be done to make owners and others who are providing the racing 'product', feel that their contribution is welcomed and appreciated.

In my time as a trainer many racecourses have dramatically improved the package provided to owners in terms of catering, but it needs to be accepted that this has actually been done at owners' own expense with entry fees which used to be added to prize-money now going to the racecourse, and we still need a sea-change in attitude from most courses.

PRIOR to the Covid pandemic, the average number of owners' admission badges provided by racecourses was 1.6 per runner. I doubt if that has increased significantly, if at all, and yet there is still an attitude from the vast majority of courses that this is some tremendous benefit that they are providing for owners when the reality is that it is owners who are providing the benefit of horses to racecourses, at enormous expense.

An Irish owner who has had horses with me since soon after I

started training, chooses to have all his horses trained in Britain, and rarely comes to see them run. He only comes to two British courses and, consequently, the pressure is on us to have runners at those tracks when he is making the journey. At a three-day meeting earlier in the year we managed to run three of his horses, two on the first day and one on the last.

WE should, perhaps, have told the track's management of the situation and asked that he should be looked after on all three days but it didn't seem necessary as another of our owners, who also lives abroad and had a runner on the second day, wasn't attending and was happy to give up his badges.

All was well and our owner got two badges but was told that he couldn't have lunch because, 'you don't actually own this horse'.

I HAVE deliberately omitted the name of the racecourse because it is one of the best in Britain with, perhaps, the best offering for owners, in terms of prize-money, catering and facilities in the country. Sadly, even they get it wrong. The team employed to greet owners and allocate badges at that track operate at several racecourses and generally do a great job but they have either been instructed, or have taken it on themselves, to adjudicate on which owners, or their guests and representatives, deserve lunch and which don't. It is a misguided effort to save the cost of a couple of pieces of chicken and a few potatoes. ■