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Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

AFFORDABILITY CHECKS. Apologies for starting off this month's column with such a tiresome phrase, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the topic which many feel constitutes a real threat to the viability of British racing.

The Gambling Commission was set up under the Gambling Act 2005 with a brief to regulate individuals and businesses that provide gambling opportunities in Great Britain. Now, racing is experiencing the effect of affordability checks, brought in by bookmakers under pressure from the Gambling Commission in advance of the eagerly (?) anticipated gambling review White Paper. Leading industry figures, notably those on the racecourses side of the sport, are predicting a huge hit to racing's finances which, as anybody with knowledge of the sport will be aware, are already in a parlous state.

Customers are being turned away by bookmakers unless they are willing and able to share a range of records from passports and driving licences to bank statements and tax records; presumably Nadhim Zahawi is not a regular high street punter given his recent tax travails!

As a former solicitor, I can see, to some extent, both sides of the story. In these days of money-laundering, terrorist-backed financial crime and data protection breaches, many professions

and businesses have been forced to introduce protocols to deal with questions of identity, source of funds and the like to demonstrate responsible and safe practices. On that level, it makes sense that the betting industry has to introduce similar precautions. And it would be wrong to ignore the misery that is caused by problem gambling, even though it could be argued that this societal problem is being prioritised over others, such as alcohol or drug abuse.

But when one reads of punters being asked to share personal financial information when placing a 50p Yankee on televised races, but not when shelling out hundreds of pounds to attend other sporting events, or many thousands of pounds to buy cars, one can't help thinking that the new regime has taken a step too far. Moreover, because of racing's crazy funding mechanism which has allowed the sport's financial wellbeing to become inextricably linked to income from betting, the sport stands to suffer real financial harm as a consequence of these checks.

It's a complete mess, and I would urge all of you interested in securing a healthy future for the sport to write to your MP expressing your concern at the present situation, and asking them to bear in mind British's racing's contribution to the economy as a whole as the gambling review progresses.

WHO IS your favourite pundit? I looked up the derivation of the word the other day and saw that the word 'pundit' derives from a Sanskrit word meaning 'a learned scholar'. It set me thinking about who, if any, of the various personalities who grace the screens of ITV Racing, Sky Sports Racing and Racing UK on a regular basis, would qualify as pundits under that definition?

As luck would have it, these thoughts were at the forefront of my mind on January 11, when I tuned into Sky Sports Racing to see whether Jim Walker's Capital Theory could win on his first start over a mile and a half. The gelding ran very well in a competitive event, and was just run out of the race in the closing stages by Base Note, the top-rated horse in the handicap, who came with a surging run to win close home. 'Show Me The Money! Boooooommm!' These were the precise words uttered in a guttural fashion by the 'pundit',

whom I am sure I do not need to name, as the introduction to his supposed analysis of the race. The first two horses home had disputed favouritism, and were sent off at 2/1 and 3/1 respectively; whether or not the pundit had backed the winner, or even selected the horse on merit, it was not as if he had tipped a 25/1 winner, or even advanced an accurate and detailed forecast of how the race would unfold as a demonstration of his learning. On any level, these utterances completely failed to provide a thoughtful analysis of the race or to entertain the viewer. We learned nothing about the race, or the horses involved, but simply about the ego of the 'pundit'.

At a time when the BHA industry strategy talks about improving 'the structure, presentation and promotion of our racing product', this particular piece of punditry seemed to stand out as something they might like to change.

I'M SAD to see nine Listed/Group 3 events have been removed from the Pattern in an effort 'to boost field sizes and increase competitiveness'. Six of them are events run over a mile or further (there are clearly plenty of

sprinters about). Owners are facing a hard enough task to secure a return on their investment in British racing without having the opportunities to seek black type for their horses cut, all in the pursuit of boosting betting turnover.