

Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

GIVEN THAT this column has been banging on about inadequate levels of prize-money in British racing for ages, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the fantastic news that the BHA has announced a programme of 'development races' in 2023.

These include (a) 20 x £30k restricted maiden and novice races for two-year-olds; (b) 21 x £30k open maiden and novice races for two-year-olds; and (c) 22 x £30-£50k open maiden and novices races for three-year-olds and older horses.

This initiative is seen as 'a first step on the path towards a substantial enhancement of the values of Flat maiden and novice races.' It's great news and you can bet your life that Charlie and Mark's race planning will seek to exploit these

valuable opportunities whenever possible.

I hope readers will forgive me though if I express one regret. Races within type (a) above will benefit from sponsorship by Juddmonte, while races within type (c) will be sponsored by Darley. I'm hugely grateful for the continuing support that these global racing and breeding operations offer British racing, but wouldn't it be fabulous if this kind of initiative could be funded under British racing's own steam? The boost to owners, trainers and the bloodstock industry which the development programme represents is to be welcomed and celebrated, but unless it is followed up by wider and continuing efforts, is there a danger that it could be seen as attempting to apply a sticking plaster to a gaping wound?

AS A supporter of racing who is resident in Scotland, I am very aware of the marked improvement in Scottish racecourses and the experience of going racing in Scotland over the last couple of decades. Huge improvements have taken place, notably at Musselburgh and at my own local track, Hamilton Park. The experiences for owners, and for the paying public, have, undeniably, been greatly enhanced.

So I was particularly interested in the Racing Post's Another View column on February 15. The guest contributor was Delly Innes, the chief executive of Scottish Racing.

In the face of the cost-of-living crisis and the other factors making life difficult for all of our racecourses, she reported that Scottish Racing is 'firmly focused on the future and striving to create some much-needed positivity.'

To that end, Scottish Racing has published a new document, Scottish Racing's 2023 Review and Prospectus, a document which she tells us 'has been more than six months in the planning.'

Having read the document online, I can testify to the positivity it enshrines, and given the strides forward the Scottish tracks have already taken, I have no doubt that Scottish Racing is well-placed to face up to the problems besetting our sport.

However, if you are going to use statistics in support of your arguments, there is, I would suggest, a duty to ensure those statistics are robust. In the review statistics are used to support the claim that racing is the second most attended

sport in Scotland. In a table headed 'Attendances at major sports (pre-pandemic)', racing is shown as having attracted 276,000 spectators, a figure contrasted with ice hockey (167,000) and rugby (161,000).

The figure for rugby is hugely misleading. A note in the text points out that this figure is based on the attendances of Scottish teams in the Guinness Pro 14 league in the 2018-19 season. There were only two such teams – Glasgow Warriors and Edinburgh Rugby. The statistic for rugby ignores spectators at games involving, for example, the Scottish International Mens' and Womens' teams, Under-20s, the Fosroc Super 6, the Tennent's National Leagues (male and female), and the National Cup competitions. If we estimate, and this is a low estimate, an international at Murrayfield as attracting a crowd of 50,000, and we allow for two Six Nations' matches and three autumn internationals per year, those mens' international matches alone would attract 250,000 people.

Surely alarm bells ought to have been ringing when it was suggested that more people in Scotland attend ice hockey than rugby? I also hope and trust that these woefully inaccurate figures result from an honest error rather than any attempt to mislead.

Interestingly, but frustratingly, the 'source' of these statistics is simply stated in the review as 'various sources'. More power to Scottish Racing's elbow in its continuing attempts to promote and support the sport in Scotland, but a more rigorous approach to statistics and their sources would lend greater credibility to its publications.

READERS OF the Racing Post's 'Birthdays' column will have noticed, and been astonished to see, that famed novelist Jilly Cooper celebrated her 86th

birthday last month. Jilly is a regular Klarion reader and took the time recently to send me a handwritten card to tell me how much she enjoys the magazine. A classy gesture from a lovely lady!