



## Why ordinary handicaps are killing interest in the sport

**I think the system of non-heritage handicaps in British racing is killing interest and excitement in most races staged every day. I contend I have a far better alternative.**

**M**Y ALTERNATIVE to our current handicapping system involves a form of promotion and relegation which allows for much more strategy that incentivises running and winning at the highest grade possible; and removes the fear of a horse being flattered or stuck on a handicap mark that it cannot defy.

The reality of British racing for the horse is this: through handicap raises, penalties and restrictions, our system is geared up to prevent all but the greatest horses from cherry-picking prizes. A horse who starts at an artificially low ebb and rises to mediocrity will win more than one who is useful early and tries to become more useful still. On average, better horses win more races but there are many counter-examples each year. In addition to many other advantages, my system remedies this.

The process where a horse's handicap mark can be more valuable than the horse is a vestige of the sport's archaic foundations. The system is outmoded and unwieldy, and it is also downright unfair.

The current handicap system offends an important principle: the expected value of prize-money won by a horse on its next start is higher for a 65 horse rated 60 than a 75 horse rated 80. In other words, a handicap mark is more important than a horse's intrinsic class!

Why is this so? Because the handicap system of the present day is extant from a time when handicaps were needed: when the horse population was sparse in number and disparate in location, and races could not be framed unless the underdog was given the incentive of actually travelling to compete. Head-to-head wagering added fuel to this fire.

### The madness of a horse's mark

**A**S SHOWN many times in these pages, some of the iniquities of the handicap system would be tolerable if handicaps actually succeeded in levelling the playing field. But they do not. Top weights win more often than bottom weights because the scale is too narrow to accommodate the true differences across the now-swollen continuum of talent.

To the unscrupulous, handicaps are an opportunity to

manipulate a horse's form. And this continues to dog the sport's headline news. To this long-standing controversy is added the problem of whether British and Irish handicap marks line up. Surely you could not invent a situation as ridiculous as having to ban lower-rated Irish-trained horses from British handicaps, just because handicapping has been allowed to descend into a pseudo-science, and individual interpretation - particularly over when and by how much to drop losing horses - has become too influential.

How many openly campaigned two-year-olds race close up in a steadily run race and end up being rated 20lb too high? This blights a functional horse's career and can cost its connections tens of thousands of pounds. And bitter experience of the effect results in disgruntled owners leaving the game or, worse still, a nefarious solution to the problem being sought by those sufficiently desperate.

### How non-heritage handicaps are killing interest in the game

**A**LL THE above factors – and more – create a competitive stramash for the sport, but they are not even the most deleterious effect of the system. Worst of all, they render competition in these races abstract from that which drives sport. Winning the races run every day has to mean more than it currently does.

This is the elephant in the room: outside of the horse's connections, do enough people care who wins an ordinary handicap for reasons other than betting? In football, winning pushes a team up the league, into the next round of the Cup, or it saves face or staves off relegation. None of this has anything to do with the tribalism which some say makes football an irrelevant analogue for racing. Imagine if a team scored a goal and over the TV replay the analyst could only think to say: "Stoke scoring a goal there is going to make things a lot tougher for them when reassessed." If this sounds ridiculous, then consider it happens at least every hour in racing broadcasts.

### Why the system persists

**T**HERE IS nothing traditional about 0-70s, 0-80s or 0-90s. Most followers of racing do not even notice the grade of middling races. The system persists partly for the reason that many things persist in racing: stasis. But also because some conflate the question of whether ordinary handicaps are a good thing with that of whether heritage handicaps are a good thing. Heritage handicaps are a good thing which should not be drastically changed, so I repeat: a good thing. But there is no need for them to be based on handicap marks which are already published and which can be gamed. Instead, the weights could be published on entry.

The biggest prizes in the sport should go to the best horses, wherever possible. Not the best horses considering the weights - that damnable phrase which is invoked when a narrowly beaten horse was carrying a lot more weight than the winner.

There would be far fewer cases of this happening if the basic system of racing competition were similar to football – promotion and relegation – with a heavily tiered prize-money structure and the opportunity for any horse to run at any level above its current certification, and one level below, if its connections so chose. Let us flesh out this simple and flexible idea.

### How an alternative system of promotion and relegation might work

**F**IRST, THERE are 10 grades. Maidens or novices can be staged, but maidens can run in any races except heritage handicaps. Every horse starts as class 5 certified. Every win gives a horse a certification one level higher, so a class 5 race win means a horse is now class 4. Three losses – however narrow – means an optional drop in certification. This eradicates the problem many hate of beaten horses being raised in the weights, rather than lowered or left alone.

That this is an optional drop is the key to injecting the strategy into the system. Overall, there will be a net change in certification downwards. In a 10-runner race, the winner goes up one grade, while the other nine runners earn one of the three defeats needed to qualify for a drop. Think of these as a  $1/3$  of a drop and the total drop is  $9 \times 1/3 = -3$ . So, the net drop is -2.

However, and here is the point: a drop in certification is optional. Take it and the horse is eligible for lower-grade races, but it will find it harder to get in higher-graded races in future for which runners are selected by certification. And a revised prize-money distribution, not only tiered but awarding a higher

slice to placed runners, means there is a financial incentive to keep a horse's certification as high as possible – unless it needs a drop to compete. So, trainers and owners handicap their own horses, in effect.

All ordinary races would then have the best advantages of claimers, without the risk of going home without your horse. And in claimers, remember, those rich in resources have the greatest capacity to drop horses well below their level to win which is iniquitous.

Again, a horse can run at any level above its certification and also one level lower. But a horse certified as class 5 who is dropped to a class 6 and wins still earns class 4 certification without having earned class 5 money.

If a horse with class 6 certification happens to win a class 3, say, it still only rises to class 5 certification. So, this provides yet another incentive for horses to run above their certification. Further, a horse could win its debut race, finish second in a Group 1 and still be eligible to win more races without being handicapped out of it forever.

In my system, a horse cannot be certified as above class 1, but heritage handicaps and pattern races are class zero and open to any horse. Heritage handicaps are based on weights published by the BHA at the entry stage and have a narrower weight range than in the past.

A horse can therefore win any number of class 1 or class 0 races, though it will face a more difficult task for each win in heritage handicaps, as these races are the only ones for which handicap weights are used – in line with their heritage format. The sport must cap the value of these races and encourage sponsors to put more money into minor pattern races, thus making them more competitive and more interesting.

### The benefits of my alternative system

**I**T MATTERS if a horse wins. It also matters if it loses. There is no point holding a horse back three times because it is relegated after three close losses anyway.

Open campaigning is even more advantaged than is the case. A horse who is certified as class 3 but is really class 4 will earn prize-money trying in vain to win class 3s, but it only takes three losses before it gets another chance at its own level, if connections want to go that way. Run more and you win more, or else get more opportunities for a drop.

Equally, horses of poor ability can still win plenty of races over time, though it will take them a while to descend to lowly certification and three races for the chance to drop back each time they win. ■