

KINGSLEY KICKBACK

Squash shows how to do it

As ever, I enjoyed reading the James Willoughby column in the March Klarion and his idea for an alternative to our present handicap system. While reading, I was struck by the similarities of his idea with the league ladder system used in squash clubs to generate competitive matches and encourage improving players to move up into the higher echelons.

Players are grouped into leagues of six or so. Everyone plays each other and then the league winner moves up a league while the player at the bottom of the league is relegated to the league below.

Of all the sports I have played, it is more true in squash than in other sports that a somewhat better player will almost always defeat a somewhat inferior player, so this league system produces more competitive matches.

Having a similar system in horse racing as James proposes would surely produce more competitive racing, which is what all parties want, and provide an incentive to climb through the ranks to heritage handicaps, pattern races and potentially the breeding chain.

David White
Henley-on-Thames

No handicapper has a monopoly on wisdom

James Willoughby goes a step too far in his wholesale condemnation of the handicapping system. Like any system, it is partly dependent for its success or otherwise on the quality of those operating it, and the freedom they are accorded.

Most owners who have been in the game long enough will have experienced having one of those horses which is too consistent for its own good and becomes stuck on a handicap mark from which it

cannot win.

The 'handicapping by slide-rule' – up a pound or two, down a pound or two – exercised routinely by the BHA's 12 handicappers (what do they all do?) counts against older horses (4yo+), the largest group among horses in training on the Flat, when they reach the end of their natural improvement and eventually start to decline.

What is needed is not a replacement, but an alternative to the bloated diet of low and middle-grade handicaps for these horses, an alternative which gives their connections more choice. The programme of veterans' handicaps (6yo+) helps to keep horses in training for longer (bolstering the stagnating numbers of horses in training).

Racing would benefit from the veterans' programme being expanded, provided the BHA handicappers exercise more discretion in the way the results of these races are handicapped. It is not unknown for the winners of veterans' handicaps to find themselves raised to a mark that they never even reached while they were in their prime! The form of any race should be recognised for what it is, not interpreted in accordance with a rigid, self-perpetuating formula.

The stifling of flair and judgement within the BHA's handicapping team leads to too many manifestly unfair and unrealistic marks. Centralised handicapping has resulted in a 'take it or leave it' system and only exacerbates the problem.

If the BHA is to have such a big team of handicappers, maybe they would be better split into teams which operate independently and produce, say, three different handicaps covering the whole of the horse population, which are then applied by rotation to different races each week, using an equitable geographical spread.

No handicapper, or team of handicappers, has a monopoly on wisdom and, freed from the shackles of corporate collectivism, the three teams of handicappers ought to provide choice. That, however, is almost certainly too

Handicap special

Last month in his Klarion column, James Willoughby told readers:

'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 better alternative.'

We asked you to respond to James's idea, and here we print some of your replies.

radical a step for the authorities. Perish the thought!

The limited programme of classified stakes and claimers offers older horses two alternatives to the current uniform handicap system, but there are problems with both these types of races and there is certainly scope for more ingenuity and variety in the racing programme.

A substantial, alternative series of graded conditions events should be introduced, at least for an experimental period, with horses moving up and down the grades, whether based on wins or number of losses as suggested by the Willoughby column, or perhaps according to a horse's BHA mark (as with classified stakes but using imaginative penalties and allowances), or even simply according to the amount of prize-money a horse has won in a given period.

Geographical restrictions, or restrictions based on stable size, might

help to ensure competitiveness and prevent such races, if they were to be open to three-year-olds, being dominated by over-matched horses from the top yards.

It is wrong, by the way, to assume that punters prefer to bet on handicaps. At the 2022 Cheltenham Festival, for example, only two handicaps made it into the top ten races based on betting turnover, and it was the same story again this year.

Geoff Greetham
Halifax, West Yorkshire
Former Timeform editor

Six ways to improve things

Further to James Willoughby's interesting piece in last month's Kingsley Klarion, I would like to offer a few of my own thoughts.

1. Handicaps are an essential part of our racing, but we ought to get them back to under half of all races. Races for 'Non-winners of . . .' and Non-winners since . . .', as well as Rating Related/Optional Claiming races could play a part in a more imaginative programme. The latter would require a rating/value format based upon previous year's HIT sale results. [See 6 below]

2. A first rating should be awarded only upon positive, rather than negative, evidence. We had a first-four qualification for Nurseries which could

easily be universally applied.

3. To make that first-four plan viable there would need to be an imposed streaming of Maidens; given that 50% of all yearlings cost below a median of X, it seems reasonable to propose that 40% of all Maidens be confined to those sold [not bought-in] for X or entered to be claimed for X. Far too many fairly smart horses go into the system when a win that should never have been an option led to an assessment just as inaccurate as three search-party efforts would have earned for lesser lights.

4. Horses incapable of a placing in such restricted Maidens should be relegated to a claiming price of, say 75% of X. However bad connections claim them to be, they ought to be obliged to demonstrate that fact through the risk of being claimed.

5. I would seriously consider removing the handicap eligibility from any horse failing to, say, finish in the first half of the field four times consecutively. Decreasing the number of handicaps would allow those disenfranchised to re-qualify for a rating in an, often smaller field, Conditions race.

6. On the other hand, I would allow patently overrated animals to be instantly re-assessed on a single start when entered - at risk of being claimed - in a lower class of Rating Related race. [Obviously horses eligible under the conditions are not to be claimed].

7. I really think that the Heritage Handicap idea has got out of control. The money for races such as the Ebor is a strong disincentive to pushing horses into Group company, and the restricted weight range puts these races beyond the wildest dreams of smaller trainers. My father won the Northumberland Plate in 1961 with Utrillo carrying 7st 11lb and Desmond Cullen at the controls. It couldn't happen now!

Bill O'Gorman
Newmarket

A fear of change?

I was very interested to read the article in the March Klarion about the handicap system, a system that in my opinion is unfair and needs to be reformed.

I had a letter printed in the Klarion back in July 2012 on this issue and it is still a subject of debate.

I'm no mathematician or a statistical analyst by any stretch of the imagination, but as I suggested back then, and I stand by it, why not have some sort of league tables?

Most sports have tables based on grades and performance. As I put it back then, it would bring a new dimension to our sport to see a horse rise or fall relating to performance without lumping weight on its back to bring it in line with other horses in a particular race.

As someone who enjoys the sport I want to see the true potential realised of a horse's performance in terms of stamina and speed. How can you do that if weight stops it from doing so?

It's more or less done as a type of league with Group racing, so why not have something similar for horses below that level?

As I suggested more than a decade ago, maybe it's the fear of change?

Christine Murphy
Rochester, Kent

The Klarion welcomes your letters

Send to: klarion@johnston.racing or
Kingsley Klarion, Kingsley Park, Park Lane,
Middleham, DL8 4QZ.

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Letters may be edited.