

Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

Continuity won't cut it. We have Kate Forbes, the former Finance Secretary in the Scottish government and a narrow runner-up in the recent SNP leadership contest, to thank for providing racing and bloodstock professionals in Britain with a rallying cry in pushing for the change which is so badly needed in British racing.

Back in November of last year, hopes were raised that a new governance structure within racing might lead to some of the burning issues facing the racing industry being properly addressed at last. In addition to the crisis in prize-money, we hoped that issues such as the attractiveness of the British racing programme, small field sizes, the overblown fixture list and the drain of equine talent abroad might be tackled in a more positive environment, free of the effective 'veto' held by the former stakeholders in the ancien regime of the tripartite structure.

While it would obviously be unfair to suggest that there has been no progress in the last four months, I think it is reasonable to suggest that there is precious little sign of a sense of urgency in tackling the big issues.

So Kate is to be thanked for, albeit unwittingly, providing

racing with an aphorism, and perhaps even a verbal stick, with which to encourage racing's rulers to be bold. Clearly, continuity won't cut it; trainers continue to leave the sport, owners are cutting down on numbers of horses in training, and talented horses are being campaigned elsewhere, where prize-money offers racing professionals the hope of financial survival. And as the Dubai World Cup meeting proved again, British racing continues to wallow in mediocrity, while racing jurisdictions such as Japan are soaring to new levels of success.

The BHA have not been helped, it must be admitted, by the continuing delay in the government producing their long-awaited gambling review white paper. The words 'affordability checks' probably have come a clear second only to the omnipresent 'Cheltenham Festival' in terms of frequency of publication in the pages of the Racing Post in the last six months. Some commentators have likened the resultant paralysis to having the Sword of Damocles dangling over our heads. Others have identified the threat posed to racing by affordability checks by bookmakers as 'existential'.

All the more reason, I would suggest, for the BHA to press the accelerator pedal. The time for action is now.

WE ARE delighted to have distributed with this issue of the Kingsley Klarion a copy of Hamilton Park's impressive 2023 brochure entitled 'Our Commitment To Owners and Trainers'.

In it, the Hamilton Park executive set out in full the improvements to prize-money, to the racing offer and to the raceday experience for owners, trainers and racing staff which they will implement across their 19 fixtures in 2023. Highlights include a record prize-money offer of £1.64m, the richest fixture in the history of the course (when 212k will be on offer on Lanark Silver Bell Night in August) and a guarantee that all races will be run for at least £2,000 above BHA minimum values.

Owners will enjoy enhanced dining facilities and the Owners' and Trainers' Bar will be upgraded. Travelling staff will continue to be well looked after with complimentary overnight accommodation in the course's on-site Hampton By Hilton Hotel.

Racecourse managing director Ashley Moon and group

finance director Fiona Murdoch are to be congratulated for the ambitious programme of improvement set out in this document. Their attitude shows that they appreciate the investment made by owners and trainers in choosing to race their horses at Hamilton and wish to repay that by making their 'product' as attractive as possible.

The course is going from strength to strength, and long may it continue.

I also want to acknowledge York's announcement of record prize-money for the coming season. A total prize fund of £10.75m represents an increase of £750,000 on 2022's campaign and includes a 15% year on year increase to the course's executive contribution to prize-money. No race at York this year will be worth less than £20,000. It's no coincidence that with their enlightened attitude to prize-money, average field sizes at York last year were the best in Britain at 11.88.

At their respective levels, York and Hamilton show what can be achieved when racecourses invest in a quality racing offer and take customer satisfaction seriously.

THE ONSET of the Flat season proper kicks off Frankie Dettori's 'farewell tour'. The imminent retirement of British racing's most engaging personality offers racing's PR community a fantastic opportunity to secure wider coverage for the sport in both national and local media. Doubtless, racegoers across the country and beyond will flock to the turnstiles to get a glimpse of the maestro in action; bookmakers, quite rightly, will double down on efforts to whip up support, from

housewives or whoever, for Dettori's last Derby ride, or Guineas ride, or Ebor ride etc.

Racing owes a debt of gratitude to Frankie for the positive impression of racing he has given the British public over the years. But the hugely popular jockey doesn't always make the right choices.

How else could you characterise his decision to be involved as jockey/team manager with the lame duck Racing League series this August?