

# Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

**A**S IT seems only British horse racing can, the industry decided that the end of last month was the right time to announce moves towards 'premierisation' of racing and making the most of our top meetings and races, even though the Derby and the Oaks were just a fortnight away.

Not content with switching the start time of the Blue Riband of the Turf to 1.30 (what will the King do about lunch?) to avoid a clash with the FA Cup Final, it seems it never occurred to racing's great and good that the publication of the BHA Board's long-awaited thoughts on dealing with the existential crisis facing the sport might deflect attention from the forthcoming Epsom classics.

Indeed, if we are to believe all we read in the press, a number of influential figures from the independent racecourses and their briefs will have spent much time recently huddled together in corners discussing what legal action might be taken should the measures designed to prune the Saturday racing schedules have the dramatic effect on their finances which they fear.

To be fair to the BHA, this column, along with many other voices within the sport, has long been calling for urgent action. If the 'core principles' agreed unanimously by the BHA Board lead to 'longer-term improvements to the structure, funding and promotion of the racing product', I will be the first to applaud them.

**F**ULL details of the core principles are available on the BHA website ([www.britishhorseracing.com](http://www.britishhorseracing.com)). I would urge all our readers to study them in full. At this stage, they are just 'principles' and, of course, the devil is in the detail; how devilish the effect will be on the 2024 fixture list we are yet to establish.

Using the term in its broadest sense, it is surely impossible to argue against the 'premierisation' of British racing. It is the major meetings and festivals, the historic races and racecourses and the equine legends of the turf which have created the history and tradition which, over the years, have led to significant inward investment to the sport in Britain, investment frankly without which the sport may not have survived. If we are to retain that inward investment and, perish the thought, create more inward investment from new sources, then it can only be achieved by ensuring that the quality of the racing programme and the prize-money on offer at the top level is sufficient to attract high-level participants, and to keep them racing their horses on these shores.

However, there are a number of the proposals which strike me as problematic and ill thought out.

Firstly, I have real doubts about the Saturday shop window, from 2pm to 4pm, when only three fixtures, including up to two 'Premier' meetings can take place. It may be the 'peak customer engagement period', but it seems to me to be a flimsy basis upon which to force other courses to reschedule, and one entirely rooted in pleasing the betting industry. And why 2-4? Why not 1-3, or 3-5? Have the BHA taken into account the significant proportion of

the British population whose main interest at that time of the week is football?

Secondly, there is a suggestion that 200 Flat races will be moved from the summer and other parts of the year to the autumn and early winter. I find this utterly preposterous; autumn and winter schedules are already well-supported, with trainers keen to give late maturing juveniles a run and others looking to run their older horses in advance of the horses-in-training sales. It is also a hugely busy time for Flat trainers, with the yearling sales ongoing from August to November. And, obviously, the later the fixture in the calendar, the greater the risk of abandonment. Frankly, 200 races (or more) should be cut from the fixture list, preferably at the lower end of the ability scale.

Thirdly, the mind boggles at the prospect of 'a one-off pilot of six, high-value Sunday evening fixtures aimed at lower-rated horses in the first three months of 2024' to be staged at the five courses with floodlights. It says it all that the BHA's own document describes this initiative as 'introducing a new betting session'. I have no objection in principle to Sunday

racing, but it should come with appropriate mitigations for those involved in the sport (e.g. I would support making Mondays a blank day for racing). Who will relish travelling horses from Lingfield to Middleham after the 9pm race (or should I say 'betting event?') on a midwinter Sunday night? And why should these meetings be 'high value' for 'low-rated' horses? Never mind the quality, feel the betting turnover.

Lastly, there is a distinct lack of detail, or for that matter aspiration, as to how to address the core product. The document states that 'while Premier racing is designed to encourage new customers into the sport, it is vital that racing then retains those new supporters through an exciting core product.' I can see no proposed improvements. James Willoughby suggests that this is an appropriate time to widen the use of sectional timing in the sport. I agree, but wouldn't it be great to see some real changes proposed, like reducing the number of low-grade handicaps that dominate the British racing scene?

**I**T's easy to argue that handicaps exist to give every horse a chance of winning, but their negative influence on the sport is all too easy to see. They destroy the narrative of success: spectators are encouraged to focus on the winner, when often the winner is far from the best horse in the race. They also penalise success: owners new to the sport soon realise that an early win for their horses is often unlikely to be followed by repeated success as a handicap rating is used as an anchor. And following that through logically, there may be those who will seek to work the system, making decisions and planning entries with a view to only 'trying' when the money is down.

The agreement of core principles is a starting point for change. Let's hope that, as momentum gathers, some wise heads prevail when we get down to the detail. ■

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