

# Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

I WAS pleased to see that the Racing Post's Lee Mottershead devoted his Monday column on July 24 to *The Racing League*, the third iteration of which has started again this year in a new and, hopefully, improved format.

In a succession of Thursday evening meetings, various teams of trainers, jockeys, horses and managers will compete at a variety of ARC racecourses for teams with whom they have little or no connection in seven handicap races in search of points, and, it must be admitted, decent prize-money.

Mottershead rightly drew attention to the yawning disparity between the Racing League's aspirations as to attendances at their meetings and the stark reality.

Harking back to what was said at the London launch event of the League in March 2020 (the initial series was delayed by a year because of Covid), Mottershead reminded us that the chief marketing officer for the project, Oli Harris, had huge ambitions for what the League could do for racecourse attendances. 'We're going to try and engage millions of fans,' he assured those present, 'not just hundreds of thousands.'

Back in the real world, the reality would prove very different. In Year 1, 2021, total attendance across the six evening meetings amounted to just 12,102 paying customers. For any reader thinking that you have got to start somewhere and that the idea will take time to catch on, there's some bad news. In Year 2, 2022, that figure fell to a calamitous 7,935. At Lingfield's League meeting, the attendance was 1,362 and for the 2022 finale card at Newcastle, just 840 souls were interested enough to turn up at Gosforth Park. Until we see how this year's event unfolds, it would be unwise to trust, in the well-known lyrics

of the D:Ream classic, that 'Things Can Only Get Better.'

In his article, Mottershead acknowledges that the fixtures have positively impacted on betting turnover figures for Thursday evenings, but also expresses concern that the fixtures have negatively impacted on handicap races outwith their ambit.

It's all a far cry from the original 'Grand Prix'-based idea behind Championship Horse Racing, 'where Horse Racing Meets Formula 1', a tag-line still highly visible on the CHR website.

One thing that is undeniable about the League however, is the decent level of prize-money on offer. One race at Yarmouth on July 27, a Class 2 handicap, was worth £51,540 to the winner, a tremendous purse for a Thursday evening. Indeed, the League's website promises prize-money of £2m+, spread across the 42 races which comprise the series.

But where is this prize-money coming from? Among 'partners' referred to on the website, excluding charities, only ITV, Sky Sports, William Hill and Scimitar Sportswear are listed. It's hard to see that those organisations will be falling over themselves to back the series significantly in the light of appalling racecourse attendances and disappointing viewing figures.

And if there is a prize fund of more than £2m, is it coming from a source which wouldn't normally benefit racing?

If the answer is that the funding is coming from 'high net worth individuals', what's in it for them in return for their 'investment'?

Please Mr Mottershead, can you follow up on your Monday column and find out for us from where the League is sourcing its prize-money?

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ONE OF the saddest aspects of the forced retirement of Subjectivist from racing is that his greatest achievement seems so long ago. Tributes have rightly been paid to Charlie, Mark, vet John Martin, the veterinary staff and the dedicated employees of Johnston Racing who have collectively done everything in their power to give the horse the best chance of making a comeback to the track. That the great stayer was able to race three times this year and add to his fabulous record

was fantastic for all concerned; it's just a pity that the memory of his wonderful run at Ascot in the summer of 2021 seems so far away.

Mark Johnston has trained three winners of the Ascot Gold Cup, all very different characters and types in Double Trigger, Royal Rebel and Subjectivist. It's hard not to imagine that, but for injury, Subjectivist would have gone on to match, and in all probability to exceed, Royal Rebel's achievement in winning two Gold Cups.

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The waiting is the hardest part. So wrote Tom Petty in his song, The Waiting, in 1981. It's a phrase that comes to mind time and again at the moment, when I read about yet another trainer surrendering his or her licence because of economic reasons, or owners accepting offers from foreign buyers for horses who have shown promise on the track. It was back in May that the BHA announced agreement on core principles for innovation and improvement in the 2024 fixture list. Precious little more has been said about these core principles and we're now three months on, and moving to the

brink of the yearling sales season, when trainers will be expecting (or, in this climate, would hoping be a better word?) that owners will be looking to recruit new talent for the year ahead.

For everyone's sake, more progress needs to be made and needs to be made quickly. Yes, I appreciate that work on fixtures and funding is complex and involves many competing interests. But it doesn't take a genius to look at the state of racing in Britain at present to see the stresses and strains under which people are operating. An existential crisis? You bet it is.