

# Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

**W**RITING IN the Racing Post of September 28 Richard Forristal said: 'October is upon us and still we await the 2004 fixture list for British racing. We probably shouldn't be surprised because the body of work involved in making the premierisation concept fly really is unfathomable.'

He bemoaned the delay, but wasn't at all surprised. A major shift in emphasis and fixtures which will result in 'fewer races, reduced prize-money at the majority of fixtures and the onset of a fixtures equivalent of the graveyard shift? Not an easy sell,' he concludes, rightly.

Of course, Richard is looking at the negative side of the likely changes for most racecourses. Set against that, it's hard to argue

against the idea of premierisation per se; who would deny that an attempt to highlight the sport's premier fixtures by directing more attention, promotion and resources (i.e. increased prize-money) to them is a mistake?

But Richard's reference to 'making the premierisation concept fly' exemplifies just what a tall order it is to do this simply by means of a complete overhaul of the fixture list.

I'm sorry to repeat myself, but the idea of a 2pm to 4pm shop window around which racing's leaders are building (arguably destroying) the fixture list is so ludicrous as to be barely credible. Take the last Saturday in September as an example.

Racing from Chester, Newmarket and Haydock was scheduled to feature on ITV3 from 1.30pm to 4pm. Competing against the racing on the day, and in particular during that 'shop window,' were, among other things, the second day of the Ryder Cup in golf, the Rugby World Cup (Argentina v Chile), Rugby League's Super Eliminator on Channel 4, Snooker's British Open live on ITV4, Southampton v Leeds on Sky Sports, a Longchamp card

featuring two Group 1 races on Sky Racing and the small matter of a full programme of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish football taking place across the British Isles. Add to those attractions, the usual weekend leisure pursuits of golfing, fishing, shopping and spending time with family.

By any reasonable standards, Newmarket's fixture on the day was of a very high quality. The card featured three of the

premier (oops, there's that word again) juvenile races of the season and one of British racing's best-loved heritage handicaps. True racing fans will already have been well aware of the significance of the meeting.

Can someone explain to me, therefore, what is likely to be achieved by telling Ripon that they can no longer race on that

Saturday afternoon? And, if you can answer that one, please explain to me what new bettors are likely to be more attracted to the Newmarket fixture (perish the thought that we should be aiming at increasing the number of people attending HQ) by tinkering with the fixture list and introducing that blasted 'shop window'. No wonder it's taking a while for the fixture list to emerge!

**T**HE main thrust of Richard Forristal's article was to point out the need for Britain, Ireland and France to co-operate in framing their respective fixture lists. Rightly, he argues that the Cheveley Park and Middle Park Stakes, hugely significant races in the racing and breeding industries, received little attention and promotion in the week prior to raceday because they were overshadowed by the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe taking place the following day. Again, Richard is spot on, but the chances of the BHA taking note of this argument appear slim given the manner in which British Championships Day was established and continues to be supported despite its obvious flaws.

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**T**HIS MONTH I had the pleasure of reviewing Richard Wills's new book on the life and works of the early equine artist, James Seymour, for the Klarion. In studying many of the images, I was struck by his depiction of many grooms and jockeys, and it set me wondering about the lot of modern jockeys and a couple of the current issues facing them.

Firstly, I was interested to note that jockey Tom Marquand, who last month completed his first 1,000 winners in Britain, is arguing for the cessation of the 'one meeting' rule. First introduced to stop cross-contamination between pools of riders at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the rule seems largely to have been regarded as positive for jockey welfare, in the sense that it has prevented most jockeys (not all, as there is an exemption for foreign meetings) engaging in

constant travel in pursuit of winners.

I support Marquand's position for a number of reasons: I think the rule has had an adverse effect on the jockeys' title race in that challengers effectively have fewer opportunities to narrow gaps on their rivals, but more broadly I regard the rule as a blanket ban, whereas a more subtle approach could have been taken to regulating the issue. For example, could jockeys have been limited to riding at, say, eight or nine meetings a week? Modern technology could keep track of their appearances, and sometimes fixtures lend themselves to easier travel (there was one day last month which saw racing staged at Redcar and Newcastle).

And, talking of blanket bans, was it really necessary to remove all racecourse saunas? A sledgehammer to crack a nut?