

Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

LAST MONTH I was lucky enough to attend the Horseracing Industry Conference organised by the Racing Foundation at York racecourse. The first keynote address was given by David Jones, senior independent director of the BHA and the chair of the Commercial Committee. He spoke on the theme of ‘delivering innovation through collaboration’, and was generally positive in his outlook towards the future, basing that confidence on the new-found spirit of collaboration amongst racing’s stakeholders in the wake of the abandonment of the Tripartite Agreement, as evidenced by the recent publication of the 2024 fixture list.

There were also a number of thought-provoking contributions throughout the day, from within and without the sport. There was some agreement among those to whom I spoke that references to the need to engage children aged 5 – 12 in the sport were well-judged and crucial.

However, I couldn’t help thinking that the timing of the conference had worked out perfectly for Mr Jones, and for those delegates from within the BHA and the racecourses. Reasonable questions and observations from the floor on such issues as disclosure of media rights income by racecourses and what a

‘Premier’ raceday might look like were easily brushed aside, either by being hushed away as an unhelpful negative comment in this new collaborative racing world, or by being assured that ‘workstreams’, clearly a favourite buzzword chez BHA, were in hand to answer all our queries about the detail surrounding all the issues posed by the changes in the fixture list in the immediate future.

Convenient that. As ever, the devil will be most surely lie in the detail, collaboratively produced or not. And those workstreams need to flow to a conclusion soon, to deal with the growing concern that the changes envisaged in the publication of the fixture list may not be radical enough to effectively combat the continuing difficulties facing the sport.

It’s also a little concerning that while announcing that Key Performance Indicators and targets are to be published ‘shortly’ to enable us to assess the success or otherwise of the two-year fixture list experiment, Mr Jones felt the need to say that these targets ought to be seen ‘as a guide and basis for discussion’, and that the position should be looked at ‘in the round’ and ‘over time’. Doesn’t sound like dynamic collaboration to me, though I hope I’m wrong.

REGULAR READERS will be aware of my repeated requests for clarification as to the funding of the Racing League. I had begun to despair about the racing media ever accepting my challenge to find out, but Mark and I had the pleasure of discussing this with Jeremy Wray, its founder, at the conference. But even before that, Mark, exasperated that my questions were not being answered, had actually emailed Martin Cruddace, CEO of the Arena Racing Company, to enquire whether the Racing League prize-money represented ‘new money’ coming into the sport.

As I suspected, the prize-money for the league is funded by executive contribution from Arena, which in turn arises from the media rights income generated by the fixtures themselves. As Mr Cruddace puts it, in his reply to Mark: ‘We must underwrite the prize-money. Clearly that investment gets us the fixtures, so, ipso facto without the fixtures that money would disappear.’

Confirming that the prize-money and earnings from the fixtures do not balance out, Mr Cruddace suggests that ‘we (Arena) are trying to build something long term. We have seen a welcome uptick in attendance and sponsorship lines which helps alleviate our concerns.’ That the 2022 finale of the Racing League at Newcastle attracted an attendance of just 840 suggests it may indeed be a long-term project to balance the books where the league fixtures are concerned.

Call me cynical if you like, but it seems to me that the creation of the Racing League concept has simply served to allow Arena Racing Company, who already hold a substantial proportion of the meetings within the fixture list, some 39% of British fixtures according to an old source, to skilfully add an annual six midsummer evening (‘the silly season’, as Mr Wray referred to it at the conference) fixtures to their portfolio. Nice work if you can get it.

MY WIFE and I recently took advantage of a brief stay in the fabulous Cashel Palace Hotel in Cashel, Co.Tipperary (highly recommended by the way) to visit the nearby Coolmore Stud.

We were treated to a private tour of the main complex and allowed to get up close and personal to a number of the resident stallions including Australia, Camelot, Saxon Warrior and Sottsass. We were also given a private tour of the remarkable on-site



museum, which includes not only a staggering display of artefacts, trophies and memorabilia relating to the great winners produced at Coolmore, but also the preserved body of the great stallion, Sadler’s Wells. It’s a fabulous and highly impressive place and our thanks are extended once again to Coolmore’s Tom Harris, who acted as our host, and to the members of staff who paraded the stallions for us. A truly memorable experience.