



Mark Johnston's

SIMPLIFY RULES,

BY THE time you read this, if you take the trouble, you may know considerably more than I do at the time of writing about the new concept that is Premier Racing. When the Klarion drops through your letterbox the first Premier Raceday, at Cheltenham on New Year's Day, will already have taken place. I wonder how many of you will have noticed the difference. John Scanlon and this month's guest writer Ged Shields are suggesting that it will be little more than a 'paint job'. I sincerely hope they are wrong but strongly suspect that they will be right.

One of the 'key areas of innovation' unveiled in the BHA's press release on Premier Racedays which intrigues me is the idea of 'simplified racecards'.

That release says: 'Enhancements to the racegoer experience will be trialled, including simplified race cards, better explanation of racing's language, a more engaging experience around the paddock and greater use of data.'

I'd love to know what a simplified racecard is going to look like and how this will help enhance the racegoer experience. To my mind, racecards are already oversimplified and desperately lacking in information when compared to programmes offered at other sporting events. I take it that the better explanation of racing's language and extra data are not going to be included in the simplified racecard. Could the inclusion of this extra information be classed as a simplification? I can't imagine that it could, but you never know.

I well remember when racecards included more information than they do today and, in particular, how the list of runners in each race was preceded by a detailed description of the conditions of the race including an explanation of the different weights carried. Many years ago some racecourses started to print all race conditions on one page at the back of the racecard and this policy was soon adopted by them all. And I also remember, very well, the one meeting at Ascot when they decided that race conditions were not required at all and they omitted them altogether.

I don't know if I was the only one who pointed out how unacceptable it was to run races in which horses carried different weights without any explanation of why this was the

case or details of the conditions under which these weights were allocated, but the race conditions were returned to the racecard at the next meeting. I dearly hope that the 'simplified racecard' is not a similar harebrained scheme.

In the same BHA press release, it is notable that Seb Butterworth, a director of Flutter, the parent company of several betting firms, said: 'One area we are particularly excited about is the rollout of simplified racecards. Racing is

often cited as a difficult-to-understand and engage-with sport, particularly from a form perspective, and these new racecards, developed upon customer research and feedback, will be aimed at demystifying racing and making this amazing sport more accessible to a broader demographic.'

If racing is often cited as difficult to understand and engage with, particularly from a form perspective, and I can well understand that that might be the case, then surely it is the rules of the sport and the conditions under which races are run that need to be simplified, not the racecard?

We are the only professional or elite sport where the athletes do not compete on a 'level playing field', i.e. where they are handicapped. No wonder it is difficult for people to understand and engage with it. We have that wonderful simplicity of a winning post that everyone can recognise and then we ruin it by making the participants carry different burdens, for a variety of different reasons, and we make the sport too complicated for the vast majority to understand. And I have yet to get any satisfactory answer to my often-asked question: Who, apart from the betting industry, benefits from the handicap system? I wonder if Seb Butterworth would be as keen to see a simplification of the rules as he is to see a simplification of the racecard.

IHAVE long been critical of the handicap system and in recent issues of the Klarion I have set out to debunk the notion that handicapping is any kind of science by showing why there is no measurable or consistent correlation between weight carried and performance. I have, I believe, shown that handicapping does little more than sort participants into divisions of very roughly similar ability – something which I believe could be done just as well in other

Straight Talking

NOT RACECARDS

ways – and then muddy the waters by having them carry different weights which will have an effect but not a consistent or measurable effect on performance.

Now in writing this piece, and in considering the value of simplifying racing to make it more accessible to a wider audience, I started to think of other ways in which we complicate the sport and un-level the 'playing field'. I started to wonder about those other centuries-old anomalies, the weight-for-age and weight-for-sex scales. Why do we need them? Who benefits from them?

There are plenty of races, at all levels, restricted by age



group and/or sex. In all-age competition, would the public not prefer just to see which is the best horse rather than the best horse according to some guy from the past, pictured left, called Admiral Rous? I, for one, would be willing to wager – actually, more likely to wager, and there are many who think that is what it is all about – that Sea The Stars would still have won the Arc.

IHAVE only just thought of this and I am still wondering what effect the weight-for-age scale has on the population of horses in training and the thoroughbred breed. If we scrapped it, would horses tend to stay in training for longer, at least until they reached peak ability? If so, that in itself would increase Flat racing's popularity.

'Kings' need no instructions

THE RACING Post's deputy Ireland editor David Jennings produced a really fantastic 'The Big Read' piece on Christmas Eve in which he interviewed the 'Three Kings' – Ruby Walsh, Davy Russell, and Barry Geraghty. I was drawn to it by the headline above a short preview piece the previous day which quoted Russell as saying: 'I couldn't take instructions from O'Learys'.

I have always been interested in the subject of jockeys' instructions as it is clearly an accepted principle in racing which is even written into the rules, but I have never been able to get my head around it. I once overheard John Gosden telling his jockey, when legging him up for the Derby, 'don't fall off' – that made a lot of sense to me. And I'm aware that by far the most common instruction is 'get a lead' (the main reason that we have so many front-runners) but, beyond that, I can't really think what kind of instruction, as opposed to information about the character or past performances of the

horse, could be of benefit. I could, therefore, sympathise with Russell who claimed to have genuinely tried to follow instructions but found it totally alien as he had always previously been left to his own devices.

There were many other interesting things in the article, including details on the professionalism of these three men and the effort they put into studying the form and characteristics of their own mounts and the opposition. No doubt this level of attention to detail is one of the things that sets the champion jockeys apart from the rest, and it is something I have seen in the likes of Ryan Moore and Frankie Dettori.

Maybe David Jennings could do a similar interview with Frankie, Ryan and, perhaps, Kieren Fallon. Or, better still, maybe John Scanlon could do it for the Klarion. That would be something.



● It is interesting to note that the Jump Trainers' Championship runs from April 30, 2023 to April 27, 2024. And, guess what? The Jump Jockeys' Championship runs for exactly the same period, April 30, 2023 to April 27, 2024. The Irish Jump Trainers' Championship covers exactly the same period, and their Jockeys' Championship does too.

Now, can someone tell me again how it has come to be that the British Flat Jockeys' Championship has been reduced to less than six months? And, remind me, who benefits from that?

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● What's happening about the BHA's idea of limiting the number of runners that a trainer can have in a single big handicap? It all seems to have gone a bit quiet on that front. Has it already been given up as a bad job? Probably.

If nothing else it would have provided plenty of food for thought and debate. I couldn't help but think that those supporting the idea were doing so principally out of self-interest.