

# Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

**W**HAT STRANGE times we are living in, especially in the little bubble of British Racing. In an effort to give life support to the industry, we have, since the turn of the year, introduced a whole new package/strategy, designed to attract new racegoers, more television viewers, new fans to the sport, pay better prize-money to owners and encourage owners to retain horses to race on in the new, shiny bright world of Premier racing in Britain. Entirely predictably, however, racing has launched this new Nirvana with a deafening display of silence.

Don't worry, we're told. The promotion will follow, especially as there seems to be a trend to now suggest that 'premierisation', and I'm growing to hate that word, is really better suited to Flat racing – why?

What they don't seem to realise is that the damage has already been done. Those of us who go racing or follow the sport closely on terrestrial television or on the dedicated racing channels have already seen with our own eyes that, to all intents and purposes, there is nothing new about a Premier raceday. If we're lucky, they might dig out a new batch of blue jackets and flags and turn the QIPCO British Champions Series branding into Premier Racedays branding.

And in our strange little bubble, an experiment of holding six Sunday night Winter all-weather meetings began in January. Racing's great and good, no doubt convinced by the racecourses and the bookmakers, have sanctioned racing at such a strange Sunday time in an effort to convince that racing is missing out on potential betting turnover, presumably in the expectation that punters are sitting at home on a Sunday night just dying for another opportunity to splash their cash on low-grade racing.

With enhanced prize-money pots on offer, it will be no surprise if horsemen, albeit reluctantly, support the initiative; when starved of prize-money, horses will be entered if there is an opportunity to have a pay day. Numbers of runners at the

meetings to date suggest there is a decent level of support.

We are indebted, however, to the Racing Post's Lewis Porteous, who has issued a warning to British racing that when the time comes to assess whether or not the experiment has been a success there is a need to approach the data with extreme caution.

In an article headed 'Prize-money difference means data on Sunday evening trials comes with an enormous caveat' Porteous points out that the BHA's own key performance indicators focus on betting turnover, with new Sunday evening fixtures needing to outperform regular floodlit fixtures from Tuesday through Thursday by 15-20% to be deemed a success.

Porteous points out that for this to be a fair test the two fixtures need to be identical. The first trial card at Wolverhampton offered total prize-money of £160,000 for an eight-race card; the second, at Chelmsford City offered £145,000 for a seven-race card. By way of contrast, he pointed out, the 12 all-weather floodlit meetings between Tuesday and Thursday since the turn of the year averaged a total prize pot of just £63,300.

Understandably, the higher the prize pot the higher the turnout of runners and the more likely betting turnover will be boosted. Looking at Wolverhampton, their midweek meeting on January 2 attracted 67 runners across 8 races, with prize-money of £58,700 on offer. The Sunday evening trial on January 7 attracted 88 runners across the same number of races, with £160,000 on offer.

It would be nice to think that there will be enough people with the best interests of racing at heart to look at this data coldly and logically when the time comes, and to make fair comparisons; if not, it would not surprise me in the least to see the trial extended, with betting turnover held up as the justifying factor, with the result that the racecourses are granted this type of fixture indefinitely and then gradually let the prize-money pots revert to normal pre-trial levels.

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**I** HAD hoped that, in preparation for the arrival of Premier racedays, ITV Racing might make one long overdue change.

I was to be disappointed however. Much as I don't want to attack any company offering sponsorship to terrestrial racing coverage, I am heartily sick of the Paddy Power

interventions at commercial breaks. There may be someone out there who raised a smile each time they saw one of the ads for the first time; however, those days are long gone. I can't see that the Paddy Power organisation have much to gain by the constant repetition of these hideous advertisements. Time for a change?

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**I** N 2024 to date, Johnston Racing has used nine different jockeys – Messrs Fanning, Hart, Muscutt, Ryan, Mullen, Mitchell, Stott, Probert and Young.

It will be fascinating to see how jockey bookings develop over the season and I suspect that it will be a close-run

thing as to who emerges as our leading jockey in terms of Johnston Racing winners this year. With Frankie Dettori's departure to California, it will be interesting to see, generally, how the jockeys' hierarchy sorts itself out in the months to come.