

# THE JAMES WILLOUGHBY COLUMN



## Ideas, intelligence, imagination: A mechanism for change in horse racing

**T**HE EVOLUTIONARY process of Natural Selection relies on species having a way of trying out different adaptations. The engine is mutation, a change which enables diversity in the phenotype – the set of observable traits – to drive the so-called ‘survival of the fittest’.

The lesson from nature is unambiguous: if you do not have a way of trying different ideas, changes to the environment will result in your extinction.

The environment around horse racing has changed no less dramatically than deforestation and rising temperatures have affected the domain of living beings. The question is whether the sport and its associated commercial domain can generate enough ideas to adapt.

In recent years, issues such as animal welfare, problem gambling and even climate change have aroused protestors to cast the sport and its related activities in a negative light and attempt to erode its place in society.

These challenges to the reputation of racing can be referred to as exogenous controversies. That is, they arose first outside its competitive arena but then gradually became embedded within it.

Animal welfare, for example, has been a cause of some humans for centuries while nobody thought horse racing was at its sharp end; problem gambling is an illness which interested Sigmund Freud and afflicted Dostoevsky a long time before credit betting on the horses was facilitated.

Most people within the sport take these issues extremely seriously and want to mitigate them without damaging the sport and its way of life. But arguably a bigger existential threat still to horse racing comes from its own funding situation.

### A Premier idea with non-league execution

**C**HARGED with doing something to improve the flow of monies into the sport, the BHA and its chief executive not surprisingly acted on the notion that redistributing fixtures on different days, and at different times of the day, could improve the levy generated by the punter. Sufficient data was already available to justify this as a strategy, after all.

The so-called ‘Premierisation’ of certain fixtures – half-considered and without sufficient financial heft to support its promotion – is already in train. The frailty of both the concept and its execution to date was exposed superbly by Ged Shields in last month’s Kingsley Klarion.

Putting this to one side, let us imagine that racing’s coffers are indeed padded out somewhat by the fixture redistribution. It is still unlikely the additional funding will reverse the trend which is particularly affecting British Flat racing: the obsession with a horse’s residual value rather than exploring its potential.

Nobody seems to want to tackle the real issue with field-sizes, leading to alternative remedies which will likely be ineffectual: trainers do not want to run their promising horses. The fact is that prize-money in British racing is so badly dwarfed by other countries that there is a serious drain of talent. Many British Group races are about to become a lot less strong than they were, for all that they will be propped up prestige-wise for a while by handicappers using increasingly outdated historical averages to construct ratings.

### The importance of a competitive narrative

**T**HE proliferation of ordinary handicaps – to which alternatives exist if only they were explored – results in many British races being run in an abstract construct: the winner picks up a few grand and some nice bets are landed, but no follower of the sport is moved by or interested in the result in a sporting context. What does any of it matter, apart from to the connections?

The key to reversing this is a lot simpler than many allow: horses need to run regularly to build up form lines that the punter finds intelligible and the enthusiast finds compelling in terms of the resulting rivalries and rematches.

Handicaps have a lot to answer for. Imagine if a football team beat its local rival and then had to give a one-goal start away in the return leg! Victory in sport should lead to a more favourable opportunity – the chance to play for something bigger – without an additional penalty.

Handicaps were needed in the dark ages because the horse population was small and relatively remote. In order to bring horses of widely different abilities together in competition, it was necessary to incentivise the connections of the weaker horses with a weight concession. This would also promote wagering.

**N**OW look what has happened. Many potential punters are deterred from wagering in ordinary handicaps because they do not know the intricacies of official ratings or the weight-for-age system. So, the puzzle is not tractable.

Showcase and heritage handicaps, such as the Lincoln, Cesarewitch and Royal Hunt Cup, should always remain in the current form. As I laid out in a previous column, all this can be achieved with a simple system of promotion and relegation for ordinary handicaps with a pyramidal prize-money structure.

### Where is racing’s version of T20?

**I**T is sad for racing that a problem exists where those with the most influence are bound to have the least desire to change. They have it good under the current system, after all. The sport does not need to sell itself to the devil of modernity to come up with some new ideas. One of those is clearly not team racing featuring domestic jockeys, however. The Shergar Cup only works so well because it is a one-off featuring some interesting champion riders from around the world.

If you attend an ordinary all-weather fixture in the winter months, particularly under floodlights, it is a severe test to last out an eight-race card with half an hour or more between the races. Either the gaps need to be narrowed or something needs to go in the gaps. This much is obvious.

One novelty that could be tried is two-furlong races. These could be run either from stalls or as time trials, just like at the breeze-ups. Bookmakers love events which have multiple markets, and time trials would provoke betting on the winning time, the fastest furlong etc. I might call this TB2 Racing, for example, so there is an allusion to a shorter form of the word ‘Thoroughbred’ and ‘2’ to stand for the race distances.

**T**HERE could be two forms: the ‘T’ for time trials the ‘B’ for races from a barrier start (i.e. stalls). You could have an expanded class structure which was expanded downwards to allow poor horses to have a chance of winning and a place to run regularly. Horses could also run two or three times a week, solving the field-size issues and generating form that is easy to understand.

Now, I know there is no chance of this or any other idea taking root in British racing because so many power-brokers are determined never to innovate. The factors listed at the start of this article, and the field-size and prize-money woes, are only going to get worse. The sport needs a think-tank to harness the ideas of people with real-world experience of coming up with good ideas, like Ged Shields

for example. The sport is in crisis but behaves as if a few tweaks here and there will sort everything out.

### The natural selection of innovation

**T**HE point of introducing something like my TB2 Breeze Ups idea is not because it is brilliant or even workable, for all I know. Innovation is not a linear process where somebody sits down and thinks of a brilliant notion that others instantly agree with. Instead, I believe that new ideas and insight work like mutations in the phenotype of living creatures. In other words, a system needs to produce a lot of ideas, trial a few of them and then find it has hit on something that works.

If it is not possible to generate new ideas for a sport, it is usually a sign that it is like a trait that is no longer useful in a new environment: it is about to die out. Racing seems to have this notion that it has this immutable set of ideals which modern folk do not grasp because they just do not think the same way as insiders.

I remember my grandfather attending Wetherby races and doffing his hat at the rich and privileged owners

entering the paddock. Part of the appeal for him and many others was this form of their own celebrity culture.

Wider society thankfully does not work in such a deferential way any more and people do not have to earn their right to be respected in the same way. But the persistent ‘how many winners have you ridden?’ motif is still a tiresome function of racing’s hierarchical structure of thinking.

Powerful people are not going to want to innovate when they have it good in the first place. But racing needs to recognise that a ton of ideas – both good and bad – need to flow from all corners of the racing world, if the sport is going to survive among the fittest.

**T**HE BHA should consider hosting a competition with a good prize for the best idea which could serve as a giant suggestion box for all interested parties. The alternative mechanism – leaving it to a few highly paid executives who do not want to be associated with the necessary number of ideas that turn out to be unworkable – will only lead to cosmetic changes. It is easy to see what changes to the fixture list is supposed to achieve, less easy to see how Premierisation will work maybe, but will it really make any difference?