

We need to slaughter Racing's sacred cow



Legendary racing journalist Brough Scott contacted the Klarion in response to Mark's call in the January edition for an end to the weight-for-age scale. Brough said it reminded him of a column he wrote for the Racing Post in October 2009 and believes that his words then, which we are delighted to repeat here, are just as relevant today.

ARE JOHN GOSDEN and the rest of us as ready for radical change as we say we are? If so are we prepared to change the sporting nonsense that is the weight-for-age allowance in championship races such as the Eclipse, the King George, the Irish Champion and the Arc? If not, why not?

In his typically eloquent and thoughtful interview with Laura Thompson on Sunday (*on TV in October 2009*), John said how hard it was to look someone in the eye and tell them they ought to buy a yearling. He should try looking, as I have down the years, at a TV camera for a race like the Arc de Triomphe and tell a worldwide TV audience that what they are about to see is the equivalent of the European 1500 metre final, the showdown between the generations to find the best athlete on the Continent. When it's not. In the European Final the 18-year-olds don't get a 10-yard start.

The weight-for-age scale in these championship races is a sacred cow that has needed slaughtering for years. In 1977 I wrote in the Sunday Times of the inequity of the four-year-old Orange Bay having to concede 10lb to the Derby winner The Minstrel who beat him a short head and was then hustled off to stud as the 'conqueror' of the older horses. The late John Hislop, owner of Brigadier Gerard and one of the great gurus of thoroughbred breeding, told me the weight-for-age scale was essential for 'the good of the breed.' I think that was wrong then and even more wrong now.

Among Hislop's reasons was that if you ran these championship races at level weights very few three-year-olds would take part. So what? My point has always been that to relate to a wider audience, a 'championship' must mean what it says on the tin. If a three-year-old wants to take the kudos of beating the older horses, let him do so at level weights. If he doesn't want to risk it until he is a four-year-old, that's fine. But he can't retire claiming to be the best around.

Last Saturday (*October 24, 2009*) we hailed a brilliant new star as St Nicholas Abbey dazzled in victory in the Racing Post Trophy at Doncaster. This Thursday the Post runs a 24-page tribute to Sea The Stars whose unprecedented career is over just as the public begin to

realise his greatness. If Flat racing really wants to hold its place on the sports pages – and there were a mere three paragraphs in last week's Sunday Times – it would be planning a showdown with the new hero tilting at the current one just as Denman so memorably did with Kauto Star at Cheltenham. But it will never happen. It ought to.

This is in no way to decry Sea The Stars who I believe to be the finest three-year-old I have ever seen, and that's including Ribot, Sea Bird, and Nijinsky. At level weights he would still have won the Eclipse, the Juddmonte and the Irish Champion. And while his verdict of only two lengths over the 8lb-conceding Youmzain in the Arc makes that horse mathematically superior, most people who watched the race would agree that Sea The Stars had power enough to succeed at parity. But Sea The Stars is off to stud. He has apparently – in the Flat racing argot which people like John Gosden and me perpetuate – 'nothing left to prove.' Oh yes he has! Could he beat St Nicholas Abbey at level weights?

That we can never know, and in the almost inconceivably unlikely event of St Nicholas Abbey equalling Sea The Stars' three-year-old performance next season, he would be retired too. I would not then blame the Coolmore team any more than I find any fault with the Tsui family, owners of Sea The Stars. After what their so cherished home-bred has done both for them and for us this summer, why should they risk him for another season when a multi-million stud career is guaranteed? And if he did run against the new upstart, the dice would be loaded against him. For them it is, in the current phrase, a 'no-brainer.'

BUT it's a terrible situation for Flat racing as a 'sport'. Have as many wacky ideas as you like to attract a new audience, race over three furlongs or start at 10am on Saturday morning in fancy dress if you want to, but first make sure that the true championship showdowns are run under conditions an interested outsider can understand. At the moment they can't.

If the answers I get are the same as they were in 1977, I shall have to conclude that all these worthy committees on 'Racing for Change' don't really see this as a sport at all.

To take the line from the song – 'Tell me it ain't so.' ■