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Off the Bridle



by JOHN SCANLON

ACCORDING TO the BHA's website, it was as far back as May 25, 2023 that the BHA announced the 'Premier' racing concept as part of the cross-racing industry strategy's panacea for curing all of British racing's ills. By my reckoning, a full nine months have passed since that announcement, and despite Premier racing becoming a reality on New Year's Day 2024, I'm not aware of any significant promotion of the concept having taken place.

The only tangible sign of a difference between a premier raceday and an ordinary racing fixture is the presence of a new logo. Indeed, the BHA's website acknowledged, on December 19, that: 'New visual identity marks *first step in Racing's plans to promote Premier Racedays in 2024.*' Scrolling through that article, one discovers that 'national promotional campaigning, subject to funding, will roll out from Q3' in 2024. In other words, the promotional effort, if any, is only scheduled to begin to kick in fully after six months into a two-year long fixture list 'experiment'. And only if they can find the funding.

THIS half-hearted approach to the project has not gone unnoticed. Not for the first time, the Racing Post's Ireland Editor Richard Forristal has hit the nail on the head with his recent comments on the situation. You may have missed his remarks, as they were printed in an article in which he principally discussed the problem of small fields in elite races in jump racing. It's worth repeating what he said at some length.

'Racing is in a perilous position thanks to the impact of draconian affordability checks,' Forristal asserted, 'but it is not helping itself either by serving up such insipid fare that is being passed off as something "premier". Apart from the seemingly stillborn Premier racing concept, British racing has been tying itself in knots trying to generate betting revenue and fuel the levy with initiatives like Saturday morning and Sunday evening racing.

'It's hard to believe that the solution to an oversaturated market would be to shunt more racing into pockets of the calendar that didn't have it before, yet that's what's happening.'

IT'S that time of the year again. The Cheltenham Festival is upon us. For those of our readers who are planning a pilgrimage to the holy ground of National Hunt racing, I wish you a safe and successful journey. For the sake of racing's reputation, let's hope that the meeting passes with the minimum of injuries to its participants and without any of the protests or demonstrations which so often seem to accompany major events these days.

I, for one, will be pleased to see the festival over. As I

Seemingly stillborn? That's quite a condemnation of a major initiative within the industry, especially coming from someone in Forristal's position. But can anyone really challenge his views on the current situation? On documents bearing the logos, (and presumably therefore issued with the blessing of Great British Racing, the Thoroughbred Group, the BHA and the RCA), we were promised that Premier Racedays would 'be brought to life' by 'customer promotion, broadcast innovation, customer experience, digital content strategy, athlete promotion and betting.' For example, within those headings we were told to expect increased promotion 'using aggregated consumer insight from racecourses and bookmakers', pilot initiatives to enhance the broadcast appeal of Premier Racedays, a 'more engaging' experience around the paddock, a 'new and major focus on greater storytelling around our athletes' (who, incidentally they define as the jockeys, not the horses) and bookmakers' initiatives and special offers. What have we got so far? A little bit of commercial art to adorn some pages of the Racing Post and a few on-course signboards.

WE should really have realised that when the powers-that-be decided they could designate as many as 170 meetings as Premier racedays that we were being sold a pup.

It's like the football authorities seeking to cash in on the worldwide popularity of the Premiership by designating the Championship and League 1 as Premiership leagues, too. The claimed status has to be realistic, and the consequent experience has to be authentic. Patrons of an underwhelming 'Premier' raceday are unlikely to become positive advocates of the concept.

Frankly, it's really not good enough, and racing professionals and loyal supporters are being treated as fools.

It's one thing to say that 'workstreams' are continuing on delivery of the aspirations associated with the Premier racing project, but the utter lack of delivery to date entitles someone like Richard Forristal to use the word 'stillborn' to describe the reality of where we are at. In all honesty, it's hard to see where the project goes from here.

have said in the past, it will be nice to see the Racing Post find other topics to write about from Christmas to March, although this year the festival has had to share the journalistic limelight with the issue of affordability checks.

Incidentally, am I alone in thinking that it's becoming a regular feature of the lead-up to the festival for a heavily fancied horse to be withdrawn from one of the major events in the days leading up to the race?

The bookies must love that.