



# Mark Johnston's

## Handicaps: not fit for purpose

**A**S John Scanlon says (see Off the Bridle, p.23), when Bill O’Gorman shares his views on British racing, it is well worth taking notice. Sadly, few in racing’s corridors of power do take notice of Bill. Perhaps, he rocks their boat a little too much and is too openly critical of the current state of our industry.

His contribution to this month’s Klarion (p.6) is, as usual, full of gems for those who care to give his ideas proper consideration and have due respect for his encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of British racing.

That said, I totally disagree with his principal proposal, for a team competition for trainers. I cannot bring myself to support these team competitions which provide financial incentives for trainers, or others, to run horses for their own benefit rather than in the best interests of the people who own them. It is not what we are paid to do. Even when winning the All Weather trainers’ championship and collecting a substantial prize from ARC I could not bring myself to support the principle. On the other hand, I applaud ARC’s efforts to promote All Weather racing by putting on its Champions Day with substantial prize-money for all the connections of winners but, principally, the owners.

The thing that I took from Bill’s article and John’s assessment of it was that the current race programme is not serving the sport well and the main thing wrong with that programme is its reliance on the handicap system. Bill points out that, until the late 1990s, well below 50% of races were handicaps and that figure has risen to 66%. Now consider the races open to a winner which is not good enough to be competitive in pattern races but is too good, or too valuable to its owners, to run in Sellers or Claimers. What percentage of the races available for this horse are handicaps? 90%? More?

If it has dared to win two races, but is still in that bracket, it is effectively restricted to handicaps. There is nowhere else for it to go. What’s more, if the handicapper has rated it a little bit too highly, and it runs consistently well, it won’t be winning any more.

**J**OHN SCANLON suggests that ‘the winner of a major handicap is rarely the best horse in the race’. I’m not so sure about that. I think to say that is to take the accepted ratios of pounds to lengths a bit too literally. We need to get James Willoughby to give us the facts and figures on this but we know that top weights win far more handicaps than bottom weights. But, even if the major handicaps are most likely to be won by the best

# Straight Talking

horse on the day it doesn’t change the fact that it isn’t a level playing field and it doesn’t change the fact that it is an unfair way of deciding eligibility for different grades of races. Furthermore, it unnecessarily complicates the races for punters and other spectators and continually throws doubt, probably justifiably, on the integrity of the sport.

Remember, not too long ago, when Jockey Club Racecourses were proposing to make the Cesarewitch handicap worth £1 million and intended to retain its upper handicap limit of 110? I pointed out that the best horses for that trip and track were being considered too good to run for the biggest available prize. They would have to run for far less, even in Group 1 races. And at the other end of any handicap band you have horses that simply are not competitive in that grade but can’t get down into a grade where they are competitive without resorting to some of the tactics that Bill describes, or worse. No other professional sport would entertain such a system.

**B**RIEFLY mentioned in Bill’s piece is one of his great ideas for reform of the race programme, the Optional Claimer. He badgered the BHA about this for years and, when he wasn’t bending their ears on the subject, I and others raised it for him a few times. Eventually they took some notice and ran with it, or walked sideways for a bit, but they emasculated his concept to such an extent that the end result bears no relation to

‘The BHA emasculated his concept to the extent that the end result bears no relation to what he proposed’

what Bill proposed and really isn’t fit for purpose. I am inclined to say that there simply isn’t a radical thinker in the BHA, but that is a bit unfair. I know there are thinkers there, at least, but it seems they weren’t brave enough to offer any real alternative to the official handicap rating.

The BHA handicappers and race-planners will vehemently deny it but it seems to me that one of their underlying principles when allocating a rating is to try to prevent a horse from winning next time or, at least, to ensure that it does not run up any sequence of wins, as that would suggest that they got their initial rating wrong. Only the horse’s

immediate connections will notice, or care, if it is rated too highly. Spectators, on the other hand, love horses which run up a sequence. They are their ‘champions’. I well remember Bill’s Provideo. He wasn’t the best horse of his generation, by some way, but I was willing him to be.

John Scanlon revisits the concept of the Racing League which provided the catalyst for last month’s pieces by James Willoughby and myself, and for Bill O’Gorman to write to the Klarion. He raises a point that has been very much on my mind: the issue of ‘team managers’. Like John, I am fascinated by this concept. I have no idea how it is going to work and I wonder if the trainers who have signed up for this know – I’ll have to ask one of them. I suspect the turnover of managers in the Racing League might exceed that in football’s Premier League. I hope they won’t be getting similar severance packages.

## Virtue signalling in a woke world

**M**Y meagre vocabulary was expanded a little in 2020 and not just with words such as ‘Covid’ and ‘furlough’.

Quite early in the year, I learned the word ‘woke’ or, to be more accurate, I learned that ‘woke’ isn’t only the past tense of ‘wake’ as I had hitherto thought to be the case. I heard it used by Rupert Arnold, chief executive of

the NTF, during the debate over the suspension of racing. I think he said something like, ‘he means well but he is principally concerned with woke issues.’

Eh? I thought, what’s a woke issue? I had to Google it. My battered 2006 copy of the Oxford English Dictionary – Second Edition, Revised – still says that woke, which sits alone between

wok and woken, is, quite simply the ‘past of wake’. Google, on the other hand, says it is an adjective and that it means ‘alert to injustice in society’. It does say it is ‘informal-US’.

**A**ROUND the same time I discovered the phrase ‘virtue signalling’ when Ralph Beckett used it on Luck on Sunday.

Many people have expressed great surprise when I have confessed to my ignorance of this term and I have to admit that there is so much of it about that I now wonder how I ever got along without a name for it. It is all part of the populist trend which is pervading society and horse racing. Perception is now deemed to be more important than reality.

## Here’s tae us . . .

**Happy New Year. Out with the old and in with the new. If only it were that simple. Sadly, it seems that, as we enter January, infection rates are increasing and restrictions on movement and social interaction are being tightened when we were all looking forward to some relaxation. The threat of a potentially fatal infectious agent spreading among us is terrifying for many people and has to be taken very seriously, but who would ever have thought that**

**we would have Government telling us who we can invite into our own homes, where we can go, and who with? For me, it is bordering on inconceivable.**

**On Hogmanay, Deirdre and I were at home alone for only the second time in our married life but, rest assured, I raised a glass to you all and toasted you with the words: ‘Here’s tae us, wha’s like us, damn few, and they’re aw deid. Mair’s the pity’.**