



Mark Johnston's

Straight Talking

How can we improve field sizes?

CRAIG THAKE, the Racing Post's Head of Data (Technical & Development) was the author of the paper's 'Another View' column a few weeks ago and he sought to offer a solution to the problem of small field sizes in top-class races, both over jumps and on the flat. His suggestion, to scrap entry fees, is not a new one and, unfortunately, it doesn't work under racing's current structure.

In my time as a trainer, the first serious attempt to run a decent race with no entry fee was made by our friend and owner Brian Yeardley with his Brian Yeardley Continental Two-Year-Old Trophy (conditions race) at Beverley in early June each year. The free entry structure did undoubtedly attract more entries and, in a race like the Brian Yeardley, for two-year-olds which had generally had only one or two runs and whose connections might be aspiring to run at Royal Ascot, you would hope it might translate to more runners. It isn't as if there is really a need to worry about handicap rating and future opportunities at such an early stage, but it didn't have an obvious effect on field size, even in that race. The Hilary Needler Trophy, for fillies on the same card, for which entry fees were payable, usually attracted a bigger field, even after that race lost its Listed status.

Craig Thake was suggesting that field size could be boosted in Grade 1 and Group 1 races by scrapping entry fees and it has to be said that, if there were no entry fees in any of the top races, some horses might be campaigned just to try and pick up place money in very small-field races despite having no realistic chance and potentially, if running a 'personal best' behind much better horses, getting an unrealistic handicap rating and being condemned to running uncompetitively in future.

If this was to happen we would also have to reconsider the way the Pattern Committee assesses the strength of our best races. Currently Group and Listed races are assessed by looking at the average rating – that old bugbear, the handicap system again – of the first four finishers and a low-grade horse finishing fourth, no matter how far it is beaten, can endanger the future of the race and risk it being downgraded. Many an innovative racecourse has fallen foul of its own efforts to increase field size or competitiveness of races by offering reduced entry fees and/or prize-money down to sixth, or even eighth place, just to find that the lowly rated also-rans devalue their race.

Having said all this, I don't blame Craig Thake for thinking along these lines. I have campaigned in the past for lower, or no, entry fees; for prize-money for eight places; and for appearance money. But I learned that this wasn't the way to go

when I saw some of these ideas trialled. However, if we were to scrap the handicap system and introduce a system of divisions where horses ran at level weights against others of similar ability and could, if connections wished, run above their grade but not below, then all these ideas might have some of the desired effect.

I assume that Craig Thake is not a racehorse owner and has never worked in racing administration so he cannot be expected to know that his idea has been tried in the past, but, nonetheless, I was very disappointed to see that a Racing Post journalist could think that, 'of course, entry fees are put back into prize-money, which would then take a hit,' and that there wasn't a Post editor or sub-editor to put him right. It is more than 20 years since entry fees in Britain were 'added to stakes', Craig. The entry fees go directly to the racecourses who can do with them as they please. They go into the pot along with media rights money from the betting industry and broadcasters, income from sponsors, etc, . . . and from this the racecourses make what they like to call their 'executive contribution' to prize-money. Maybe Craig Thake is one of the few who trust all courses to add anything they get in entry fees to what they might otherwise have thought to put into prize-money rather than simply add it to their own bottom line.

Ironically, when you point out to racecourses that most entry fees (there were a few races termed Guaranteed Sweepstakes where the entry fees went to the racecourse) used to be added to the prize-money, they say that the Owners (the Racehorse Owners Association) asked for it to be done that way. Really? I know the ROA have, at times, looked to be fairly inept but could they really have suggested that the racecourses should just keep the entry fees rather than, as had hitherto been the case, add them to the prize-pot? That would make turkeys who vote for Christmas, and Americans who vote for Donald Trump, seem quite sane.

I DON'T think that is how it actually happened. I was on the National Trainers Federation council at the time and I, and others, were pressing for more transparency in the way entry fees were charged and prize-money was paid. There were, and still are, too many surcharges on top of the published entry fee (Weatherbys handling charge, etc.) and too many deductions from the published prize-money. The ROA joined the call for more transparency and, true to form, the RCA outmanoeuvred them and somehow got them to agree to all entry fees going to the racecourse while the surcharges, like handling charge, remained. The entry fee for a race with a total prize fund of £10,000 will still, most likely, be published as



The Derby, for which the first entry stage fee this year was £3,000.

£50, but the bill the owner gets will be considerably more and, no matter how many horses enter, and how many thousands of pounds are taken in entry fees, the total prize fund will still be £10,000.

ONE thing that could be done to the entry structure for these top races which would undoubtedly have a positive effect on field sizes would be to move the closing date for entries much closer to the race. All Group 1

races and most other Group races are early closing races, the initial entry stage can be months before the race, and there are usually several forfeit stages where additional payments are made to remain in the race. This early closing system has got nothing to do with attracting the most or the best runners. Its sole purpose is to draw in the maximum amount of entry fees and it is commonplace for Group 1 races to close a few days before recognised trials.

This year's Derby closed in the last week of February at a cost of £3,000 for the first entry stage. This might seem a

lot, more than three months before the race and with the vast majority of the potential runners yet to see a racetrack as three-year-olds, but it is hugely preferable to the system which prevailed for many years pre-Covid whereby horses had to be entered as yearlings at a cost of £500 before many had seen a rider, never mind a racetrack. Early indications are that the Derby is a better race for this change of policy and I dearly hope that the Epsom executive continue to be rewarded for their bold move.

WEIGHT FOR AGE? IT'S NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE

IN THE January issue of the Klarion, I called for an end to the archaic weight-for-age scale. Last month we reproduced Brough Scott's 2009 Racing Post column in which he had called for the same. Now James Willoughby has joined the debate in his own, inimitable, analytical way.

It is no surprise to me that minor changes, made seven years ago, had little or no effect on the results and this reinforces my recent claims that

adding or subtracting one or two pounds to or from the weight carried will not have a measurable effect on performance, and it certainly does not have a linear correlation as handicappers and proponents of Admiral Rous's theories like to suggest.

I recall an article a few years ago which claimed that Admiral Rous's scale was completely back to front and sprinters would need a greater

allowance than stayers to offset the fact that older horses are generally faster than three-year-olds – let's face it, that's what the weight-for-age scale is seeking to address. There was a lot of logic to it.

Let's face it, the whole process is flawed and adds a totally unnecessary complication to our sport which, like the handicap system, seeks to prevent the best horses from winning. Why not just scrap it?