

# THE JAMES WILLOUGHBY COLUMN



## The weight-for-age scale is still broken

**Y**OU MIGHT think the accuracy of the weight-for-age scale is a dry, academic topic. But the allowances for middle-distance three-year-olds are still way too generous and unfair on older horses whose connections have kept them in training.

In 2016, the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) commissioned a review of the scale. After conducting statistical work they, not surprisingly, found that middle-distance three-year-olds in the second half of the year were favoured, judged by their much more frequent success rates. This was true even after controlling for three-year-olds being lesser exposed than older rivals.

Here is the record of three-year-olds and older horses in Britain between July and December at 13 furlongs or more in the six years before the review was triggered:

Age	Wins	Runs	Win%	IV
3-y-o	267	1504	17.8	1.63
Older	364	4677	7.8	0.78

Table 1: handicap runners in Britain 13f+ 2011-2016 by age

As you can see, this is an extremely unbalanced record. The winning percentage of three-year-olds was 10 percentage points higher in races where at least one three-year-old took on an older horse, while the Impact Value (IV) of 1.63 of the younger group reveals a huge difference. (IV is Strike Rate divided by average Strike Rate – it shows that three-year-olds won these races 1.63 times more often

Distance	Wins	Runs	Win%	IV
5	411	3881	10.6	1.02
6	620	6406	9.7	0.98
7	686	6903	9.9	1.02
8	749	6582	11.4	1.12
9	221	1917	11.5	1.18
10	650	4938	13.2	1.23
11	126	873	14.4	1.40
12	525	3465	15.2	1.33
13	33	237	13.9	1.22
14-15	175	1003	17.4	1.50
16	137	744	18.4	1.68
17	20	118	16.9	1.49
18	5	34	14.7	1.73

Table 3: 3-y-os v older horses, July to December handicaps in Britain 2017-2023 by race distance

than random chance.)

Nobody could describe this as fair, not even Admiral Rous, the Jockey Club Handicapper of the 1860s who devised the scale.

The BHA responded to the result of their survey by making extremely conservative changes to the scale. They could not be blamed for this, for it seemed there was stubborn resistance to making any change among the powerful trainers with lots of well-bred middle-distance horses by the world's top stallions. Only one pound was deducted from the allowance received by three-year-olds at 10f – 12f, with 2lb removed at 13f – 2m and 3lb in races over marathon distances.

The changes have been in effect from July 2017, providing seven seasons of data directly comparable to that in Table 1. Here are the results:

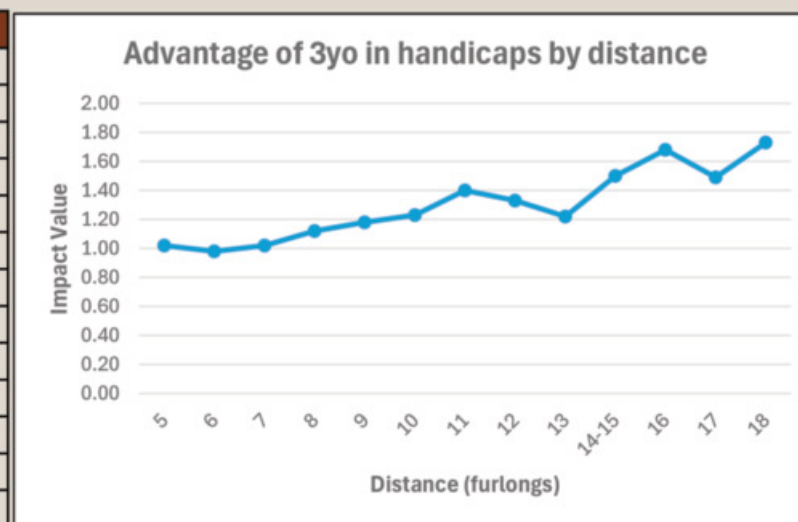
Age	Wins	Runs	Win%	IV
3-y-o	370	2136	17.3	1.54
Older	451	5444	8.3	0.78

Table 2: handicap runners in Britain 13f+ 2017-2023 by age

The gap between the age groups is now only minutely narrower. Three-year-olds now win 9% more often than older horses rather than 10%, while their IV of 1.54 is 0.09 points lower than before. In other words, there is no practical difference in the situation. The changes were nowhere near enough and the situation badly needs reviewing again.

### The fundamental flaw in WFA

In the same July – December period of 2017 to the present



day, the record of 3-y-os when meeting older horses in handicaps over various distances is shown in Table 3.

As the distance of a race increases, the weight-for-age scale allots a higher allowance – and the advantage of three-year-olds becomes greater. Such a strong relationship begs the question of whether the allowance really should increase at all. Notice that in races over 5f and 6f there exists near parity between the age groups. Why not make all the allowances the same?

### Can the soft ground bias be beaten?

**C**harlie Johnston has made a bright start to 2024. As Table 4 shows, the collated statistics of his runners across the first two months of his second season as the sole licence holder (up to 26/2/2024) are an improvement on his first year.

However, readers will know the pitfalls of making inferences from small samples. The acid test of improvement will come in the months ahead, especially when turf racing returns. Despite the trainer himself having expressed disappointment at the 2023 returns, a total of 174 domestic winners still sets the bar relatively high for him. Key to the yard's season is a greater haul of big-race success which, by the yard's high standards, proved a shade more elusive than normal last year.

One of the recurring themes of Johnston Racing's statistics is the yard's reduced effectiveness on a soft surface. Various ideas have been advanced for this, including one year when I helped to produce a report for the yard showing that the Strike Rates on each type of going were exactly what could be expected from the

portfolio of pedigrees. That, however, was in the days when Kingsley Park housed a greater number of Maktoum-owned horses who, at the time, tended to be by stallions whose progeny were most effective on a fast surface.

Since Charlie took over the licence, he has been asked a few times about the soft-ground bias in his statistics. And he seems to accept that a genuine cause – or causes – exists. Table 5 recaps where we stand in terms of the going-related tendencies of his runners.

There is no doubt Table 5 delineates a clear bias against softer surfaces. The rows marked F (Firm Official Going) and HY (Heavy) contain small sample-sizes which make drawing conclusions virtually worthless. Below that, there is a steady fall off in efficiency numbers as the ground becomes softer (SD and SS are Standard and Standard To Slow descriptions for all-weather surfaces).

### How to counter the soft-ground bias?

**T**he most obvious response in the early part of the Flat season is to maximise runners on the all-weather tracks. But the all-weather programme is limited and the better-quality horses the yard houses need to be campaigned on turf.

Horses ridden prominently – the yard's signature tactic – obviously do not have the same advantage on soft ground as fast because the end section of the race is prolonged and closers have greater opportunity to grind down the front runners. In other words, lengths gained in the early stages of a soft-going race do not translate so well to victory and have less value tactically while being at least as sapping to gain.

In round-course races, prominent racers often encounter slower conditions as the inside part of the track gets cut up.

It is hard for a jockey to judge exactly how much ground to give up by racing wide in search of better conditions, but it is usually a good policy to shun the inside running lane. Last year at Chester, for instance, it was obvious that racing a little wider than the rail was an advantage, which was backed up by the statistics.

As Charlie looks to improve efficiency still further in the years to come, soft-ground races offer massive potential to run up more wins. I would not bet against him.

Year	Wins	Places	Runs	Win%	Win & Place%	£ won
2023	12	22	78	15.4	43.6	123,898
2024	17	27	94	18.1	46.8	206,523

Table 4: Charlie Johnston-trained runners in January and February

Type	Wins	Places	Runs	Win%	Win & Place%	IV
F	2	2	6	33.3	66.7	1.96
HY	5	2	27	18.5	25.9	1.40
GF	41	54	249	16.5	38.2	1.34
SD	68	108	414	16.4	42.5	1.30
SS	19	31	142	13.4	35.2	1.18
G	27	54	224	12.1	36.2	0.91
GS	17	31	154	11.0	31.2	0.87
S	12	41	141	8.5	37.6	0.65

Table 5: Charlie Johnston runners by going type (shaded area is best data)