

NEWS

RACING needs to change its approach to the fixture list, and to the funding of fixtures.

It needs to focus its attention and resources on creating a programme of exciting, engaging, live sport, attractive to its primary customers – racegoers, owners, sponsors – and be less absorbed by chronic anxiety about its status as a betting shop product.

Racing's leaders recognise the importance of the sport's programme of events – one of the BHA's first initiatives was a root-and-branch review of the fixture list – but a lack of conviction, and power, are obstacles to reform.

Last year, a press release listed the fixture review's key recommendations. The first was, that "British horseracing has to concentrate first and foremost on the sporting spectacle. If this is right, interest in British horseracing will grow and therefore so will interest in racing as a betting product".

I agree, but racing does not behave as if it truly believes it; witness its reaction to the review's second recommendation, that "the BHA should reverse fixture list expansion".

Despite the economic recession, the BHA's response was to expand the fixture list still further, while expressing its belief that the new fixture list might well be unsustainable.

What is going on? The same thing that goes on every year, that ties the sport in a knot and provokes internal conflict; racing's desire to turn its eyes towards Glorious Goodwood only to find them drawn to the betting shop in Streatham.

For 2010, we have ended up, as usual, not with the race programme the sport would like to stage, and

WHAT RACING NEEDS TO DO



David Ashforth's prescription for the health of the sport in Britain

should be staging, but with one it feels obliged to stage.

Racing seems unable to escape from the grip of the shop in Streatham. The sport's leaders speak of their desire to make the fixture list more 'racegoer-friendly', only

for bookmakers to remind them of the compelling need to make the fixture list more (off-course) 'punter-friendly', alias 'bookmaker-friendly', alias 'levy-friendly'.

The levy is racing's shackling lifeblood, its blessed yet resented statutory support system. When the fixture list is considered, what escape can there be from reasoning that starts with the vital importance of prize-money and the fact that more than 50 per cent of it, as well as a large chunk of the sport's other costs, are paid for by the levy?

THE levy is determined by the gross profits bookmakers make from the bets they take on British horseracing, which in turn are strongly influenced by the number and nature of the betting opportunities the fixture list supplies.

What choice does racing have but to give the shop in Streatham what its owner tells the BHA and the Levy Board it needs? These are the meetings required, the days on which they are needed,

the number each day, the times of the day; and these are the races required, the number, the types, the field sizes.

Supply them, and the levy will be boosted, deny them, and the levy will suffer, along with racing's health.

Doing what is necessary to attract betting shop customers has become an even greater preoccupation as they have drifted away from horseracing towards football and roulette.

Racing's share of the off-course market has shrunk, and it would be suicidal folly, bookmakers regularly remind racing, not to give punters what they want. Racing squirms but feels obliged to agree.

AND SO, on bank holidays, days as 'racegoer-friendly' as the sport could wish, all but a handful of racecourses are closed. Bookmakers don't want and won't pay for pictures from more than four meetings, which makes the Levy Board reluctant to fund them.

With corporate hospitality income also down on bank holidays, racecourses prefer to race on other days, usually with smaller crowds.

There were 56 bank holiday meetings in 2000, 35 in 2008. It may make short-term financial sense for individual racecourses but it is not in the sport's long-term interests.

The BHA is now trying, with limited success, to rebuild racing's bank holiday offering but it cannot reshape the fixture list effectively without changing the way fixtures are funded, and the Levy Board controls that.

The main reason the fixture list has relentlessly expanded, from 1,270 fixtures in 2003 to 1,504 last year, is because the Levy Board has been persuaded that the best way to increase its income is to supply the fixtures the betting industry wants.

Yet the BHA's fixture review reported that, excluding the Tote, levy yield from bookmakers fell from £102 million in 2003-04 to £90m in 2006-07, that average prize-money per fixture fell from £78,000 in 2003 to £74,000 in 2007, and that average racecourse attendances fell from 4,934 in 2003 to 4,372 in 2007.

Perhaps the situation would have been even worse with a less 'punter-friendly' fixture list but the review found that, in 2006, the extra profit generated by the expanded fixture list was only £4.3m and concluded that the financial impact of the new fixtures had been "indiscernible".

The Levy Board should change its approach. Some of the income now spent fully funding 'betting shop' fixtures should be diverted to the

imaginative support of a fixture list designed to enhance horseracing's offerings as a live sport.

'Betting shop' fixtures provide opportunities for participants at the bottom of racing's pyramid but they are poorly attended and damaging to the sport's image, encouraging the perception that horseracing is primarily a vehicle for betting.

Low-quality races with low prize-money pose greater integrity risks than higher-value races, and relatively greater costs in countering them.

The main beneficiaries of 'betting shop' fixtures are individual racecourses and, above all, off-course bookmakers.

The Levy Board should reduce its support for these fixtures, thereby transferring more of the cost of staging them to the racecourses and betting industry, with funding arrangements determined by commercial negotiations between the two.

As the recent £106m, five-year deal between Arena Leisure and SIS indicates, a mechanism and valuation system are already in place. If a fixture selected for a reduction in levy support is then considered unviable, it must have made a very small contribution to levy income, because most of the profits generated by the fixture went to bookmakers.

If the fixture was not worth much to them, it was worth precious little in levy.

In the short term, some levy income may be lost but funds diverted elsewhere will generate additional income for racing.

RACING'S leaders need to persuade the Levy Board to back a plan that provides additional financial support for the development of premier fixtures, including an end-of-Flat-season championship meeting, an improved Saturday programme, higher-profile Sunday events, and an experimental series of four-furlong races.

The Levy Board should offer racecourses greater incentives to race on bank holidays. It could usefully invest in marketing, in experimental racecourse admission schemes, in stable staff training and recruitment initiatives.

By focusing on the fixture review's recommendation "to concentrate first and foremost on the sporting spectacle", the Levy Board will better fulfil its responsibility to apply funds for "the improvement of horseracing".

Get the spectacle right, and horseracing will increase its appeal to all its customers, including broadcasters and betting shop punters. Let's do it.

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