

# A Personal Viewpoint



The handicapping system is a subject for never-ending debate, with a fresh flurry of opinions provoked recently by comments from Channel Four commentator Simon Holt. A frequent contributor to the debate is former trainer **BILL O'GORMAN**, who outlines here some further thoughts on how he feels the system could be improved.

**A**LTHOUGH RACING has been increasingly reliant on handicaps since the mid-1800s, the trend has gathered pace in recent years.

In 1984 ratings were allotted to just over 4,000 horses aged three and older, and of just over 2,000 races for them, 1,100, or 55%, were handicaps. By 2011 the number of horses in that age group had almost doubled, but the number of handicaps had rocketed to 3,700 of just over 5,000 races, or 72%.

There were just 100 handicaps whose top weight was almost as low as the median rating in 1984; by 2011 the figure was almost 2,000!

With the number of horses up by 100% but the number of races up 150%, and the average number of annual starts per horse remaining constant, smaller fields are here to stay.

## Obsessed

Handicaps should be the “least worst option” for our racing. Unfortunately, while all aspire to be “well in”, most consider themselves to be “badly in”. As it stands, trainers are invariably obsessed by the idea of “having something in hand”. Whether this is achieved by initially winning in a deceptively low grade or by a number of “educational runs”, the end result is a vicious circle apparently justifying more low-grade handicaps.

This is the only professional sport in which bad practice is at a massive premium: fairly simple procedural changes could remove the gamesmanship and the patently underrated animals that bedevil the system.

Ratings issued only upon quantifiable form, rather than upon the lack of it, would discourage this negative approach.

Athletes rationalise their doping by saying “everyone else is doing it”; trainers are defensive for the same reason.

They would be less paranoid if they believed that the opposition entered the ratings at a realistic level, and recognised that

whether their horse was well, and whether the variables of track, ground and rider might align favourably, were more relevant than just the rating. Writing every day-to-day handicaps with a very small range, but writing fewest at the lowest level, and increasing numbers as the standard rose until tapering back again from a high point of 85 might coax trainers to aspire to higher ratings.

A far greater spread has to remain in the big handicaps; until the mid-1970s there was at least the possibility of a 42lb range – or 49lb if a tiny tot was at the controls! There ought, perhaps, to be a requirement that horses have run say six times, or won a minimum amount of prize-money, in order to qualify for a heritage race so as to prevent unexposed 3yos from running with a stone in hand.

If the percentage of handicaps fell to former levels, and if more conditions races included more maiden races, then handicaps could be confined to horses which had already been placed [as until fairly recently applied to Nurseries].

Many maiden races ought to be Auction/Optional Claiming races for horses actually sold for below the median of their crop – although also open to anything prepared to risk being claimed for the auction price. Free access to the most lowly maiden races is Not A Good Idea; it not only encourages non-triers among less well-connected participants, but has propelled many decent [even Classic-winning] horses into the handicap system far below where they belong.

## Disadvantage

There should really be some 3yo handicaps confined to horses which won as two-year-olds, for such horses are often at a terminal disadvantage against rivals which have undertaken an easier introduction to the sport.

Maidens-at-closing should be reinstated, written as Non-winners-four-weeks-ago.

Simon Holt recently suggested a type of

race weighted by money won should be adopted, but unless the restrictions to low-value maiden races mentioned above were already in place, this would still strongly favour potentially better-class horses, and it would still result in many of their opponents maintaining a watching brief.

The classification of races has been largely a waste of time. It might work if horses could be confined to a single class at any one time. But when the highest class of horse can run in the lowest-class maiden, and when any horse might easily be viable in three different classes of handicap, the classifications make very little sense.

The handicap programme should be upgraded over two or three years, until no horse can run off less than 50 – which is what the 0-45 handicaps envisaged [bottom weight received 35 lb =10, add 40 in 1986 =50].

**T**hroughout the 1970s the weights were only raised at the four-day stage, which obviously disadvantaged very low-rated horses, but after the additional overnight raise, bad horses soon started running to minus figures. Attempting to make minus ratings acceptable by adding 40 to the scale in 1986, rather than holding the line at true zero [which the old system had effectively done], was the response of bean-counters rather than realists. In other sports the poorest performers don't get to stay on tour.

Every other professional sport apart from racing promotes the pursuit of excellence. Too many changes in racing, starting with the Long Handicap, “bought-in” horses running in Auction races, and the explosion of fillies-only races, have done the opposite.

Reverting to a more demanding scenario should uncover many more “good horses”. In fact the more robust programme in 1984 produced 38 horses handicapped to give the median horses four stone, whereas in 2011, from twice as many horses, just 18 attained that benchmark. ■