

ITBA seminar – Challenges facing the National Hunt industry

The ITBA hosted over 200 people on Monday at Tattersalls Fairyhouse for an in-depth examination of the National Hunt industry, with a seminar divided into an afternoon and evening session, chaired by Leo Powell.

Current Trends In The Marketplace

The afternoon session looked at current trends, and panellists were point-to-point supremo Richard Pugh, leading National Hunt consignor Michael Moore, of Ballincurrig House Stud, journalist Richard Forristal, syndicate manager Jim Balfry and vet Liam Sharp, from Lisadell Equine Hospital.

As the manager of the successful Supreme Racing syndicate, it was Jim Balfry who got proceedings underway when responding to the opening question, what does the modern owner want? “A winner straight away, tomorrow,” he stated categorically. “It’s hard starting with just one horse and easy to become disenchanted if the horse gets injured or other problems keep it from racing.”

Balfry found that leasing horses filled that void and enabled the syndicate to have more horses running for it. He deals directly with breeders, with whom he has a good relationship, and Supreme Racing now have 40 horses in training. “It’s a numbers game,” he pointed out.

He also stressed the importance of providing top-class facilities for owners and that, although things were improving, many racecourses still left a lot to be desired. His biggest issue, however, was not with having to compete with dominant owners and trainers, but in the instant gratification sought by those investing in horses.

“We don’t find it’s a case of ‘what’s the point, we can’t compete’,” he insisted. “The problem is the disconnect from going to the sales and the 18-month wait to race the horse, it’s a major turn-off.”

Point-to-point marketplace

Richard Pugh concurred with many of Balfry’s points and agreed the only difference between the modern owner and those of the past was the quick turnaround. “Where anyone finds success, everyone follows,” he said, “be it buying from France or from point-to-points and that’s where it’s done the most for the industry. At Leopardstown on Saturday none of the horses were for sale, but every point-to-pointer can be bought, it provides an opportunity for people to buy a proven horse.

“What has changed in just a decade?” he asked. “The single reason for the success of the Irish point-to-point business is the Foot and Mouth outbreak., it created the autumn season and the autumn season allowed businesses to be structured. Between the store horse sales in June and the autumn season we have a full year cycle and it has been a huge factor in keeping the stores sales going.”

Michael Moore very much backed this up. “We started in the early 2000’s consigning stores for the sales and at that time you’d buy 20 in the hope you’d get one good horse. Then the recession hit and the point-to-point market came in and gave a good opportunity to buy a good pedigree for half the price of five years’ earlier.

“It takes out the high production costs, the point-to-point handlers are taking the pain and you can see what you’re buying. Foals are the first chance to buy for the end market and only a handful can afford to buy them and bring them through. The top pedigrees get taken out at once at the foal sales. The next point is the three-year-old sales and by then the percentage of nice horses available is getting smaller again, having lost them along the way through injury, etc, and only certain owners can afford to buy nice horses then.

“Then you have the point-to-points,” continued Moore, “and it’s averaging €40,000 to get them there. There’s a huge amount of money spent they are not making enough for what they’ve cost.” He concluded with the interesting observation: “The further away from the racecourse the more a colt is worth, but the closer to a racecourse the less valuable a filly becomes.”

Middle-of-the-road

Less positive were the contracting figures of ownership and National Hunt horses in training and Richard Forristal had concerns that the middle level in particular was suffering as a result. “Were there not always dominant forces?” he asked. “While we have them, the rest of the industry continues to shrink and even super trainers have

struggled over the years and found it hard to compete. The rest of the industry should be able to thrive on the back of it. The recession hit 10 years ago, but we're still in decline.”

He quoted the BHA's Paul Johnson when pointing out how important the strength of numbers is to the industry. Competitive racing increases betting revenue, attendance, and it all comes back to the numbers of horses in training. “The end product has to engage people and people have to feel like investing.”

Forristal also believed the industry should be viewed as more than just a sport. “Not many sports employ up to 20,000 people and more should be done to address the issues at base. Re-opening races to further entries is not addressing the problem, it's addressing a symptom of the problem. I don't think the industry is talked down too much – it's important to portray what life is like for the majority.”

Positives

“In some aspects we are talking down the sport,” argued Pugh, “there are so many positives. 10-15 years ago if we'd told Aidan McGarry (ITM) we would have all our current big owners he would have thought it unbelievable and that's a positive. My father never had a runner in a Grade 1 and it didn't matter to him if big people were winning Grade 1s, he was competing at a different level. We should be celebrating great owners and horses. If the owner below that level is not happy, therein is the problem.”

Aidan McGarry spoke from the audience to explain the measures ITM had taken to contact owners who had dropped out of the industry, many of whom were no longer living in the country. “At the time we asked, it was by far a financial issue, but there is not one single factor, there are a multitude.” Lack of communication from trainers, confusion over HRI administration and poor racecourse facilities were among the problems cited.

“For a lot of people they’re still only just coming out of the recession at the moment and the slow recovery is not the biggest surprise,” McGarry said. “The figures of 2016 are showing a slight increase and there are more positive signs again over a short period so far.”

He made the valuable point that a handful of owners are “recession-proof” and as syndicates and owners who were not competing at the higher level dropped out, it heightened the difference between the dominant and smaller owner.

Too many Grade 1s?

While Forristal applauded McGarry’s positive effect on Irish racing ownership, he took issue with HRI’s increase to the Grade 1 programme and felt there should be fewer Grade 1s and more opportunities at a lower level. Richard Pugh felt that might solve a problem, but pointed out a lot of prize money had been put into handicaps to help the small owner, but “your job is to maximise your horse” and this has simply driven the better horses into the “small man’s races”.

Perhaps echoing Pugh's earlier sentiments, Jim Balfry declared simply: "What most owners are looking for is the day out and good facilities. They're not worried about Grade 1s."

From the floor, Jason Morris, ahead of the evening session, responded that the blacktype programme was carefully thought out and was split between a range of distances and hurdles, chases and bumpers, to cater for all horses throughout the year. He agreed that Grade 2s and 3s needed to be looked at to make them more competitive, but felt the Ratings reflected the correct balance of Grade 1s. Forristal "respectfully disagreed"!

Competing with the French-bred

With some issues over-lapping the two sessions, Forristal also addressed breeders and asked for more emphasis to be placed on the quality of the mare, ahead of the discussion on the future of National Hunt fillies. "We've become very stuck in our mindset and it seems to be in our psyche that we're thinking of traditional sires we all like to see," he warned, when asked the ubiquitous question, French-bred versus Irish-bred?

"Mullins has made Walk In The Park from nothing," Forristal pointed out. "If you look at the sires of leading horses, they're not fashionable but they're doing alright. A good few leading horses are by sires I've never heard of. Whatever they're doing in France they're doing it well and we need to reflect on it. We do become prejudiced against stallions, but in France there is more emphasis on the quality of the mare."

This was backed up by statistics supplied from the audience by the TBA's Bryan Mayoh, who stated that the best racehorses were consistently produced by the best racemares, Urban Sea being a prime example. He also had figures to show that high-class 10f-12f performers consistently sired the best National Hunt horses.

"The secret is trying to breed an animal good in conformation and movement," reminded Moore. "We're too wrapped up in making it too complicated. Athleticism is still the most important. You don't have to be bred in the purple, the man in the middle is able to race with the top horses. What's most important is going to a stallion where you can make a profit, not in going to the most fashionable stallion."

"How is breeding to race and breeding to sell different still?" asked Pugh. "The end-user wants a racehorse, and the breeder should be rewarded in the sales ring for producing it."

NH race programme for three-year-olds

In addressing the issue of the French-bred having an earlier introduction to the racecourse, which Moore felt was due to being an earlier maturing animal to its Irish counterpart but Willie Mullins, in the second session, disputed, Pugh provided the interesting fact that, of 795 point-to-point horses to win four-year-old maidens, 510 (64%) of them won on the racetrack, 83% returned prize money and only 4% didn't run. "The Irish four-year-old is training on and the statistics are extraordinary," he said.

This led to the question, should there be an early programme and an inclusion in the Derby Sale for two-year-olds and less emphasis on stores? Pugh was all for dipping a toe in the water and this theme was later picked up on by Willie Mullins, concluding the first session almost where it began – instant gratification for owners on the racecourse.

The future of the National Hunt filly

The evening session then focused specifically on the NH filly, the panel comprising Jason Morris, Director of Racing HRI, the BHA's Ruth Quinn, Director of International Racing and Racing Development, trainers Jessica Harrington and Willie Mullins, vet, breeder and pinhooker Walter Connors and Michael Hickey, of Sunnyhill Stud.

The future of the NH filly very much depends on her past, as Jessica Harrington pointed out with her opening observation: "If the mare has won I'd be more likely to buy a horse than one with a similar pedigree from a mare that hasn't run." She added: "A filly with a good pedigree is a desirable product to buy, as a racemare and as a broodmare." Willie Mullins was in full agreement. "I love a page of winners, whether they were in Timbuktu, Sweden, wherever, winners mean soundness."

It was agreed by the panellists that the current weight allowance of seven pounds against geldings was a great advantage to most mares and had helped, as had the ITBA Scheme. "Because there are now more mares races we're inclined to buy more

and you can acquire fillies easier for small owners and syndicates,” Willie Mullins commented. “Should we be trying to race our fillies earlier and get them to the paddocks quicker? In France they race them at three and four and then breed from them if they were any good. It’s going to be hard to fit three-year-old fillies races into our programme, but should we be looking at that?”

Early to race, early to stud

Walter Connors told of his success sending a young NH filly to race in France and retiring her to the paddocks after a successful and busy four-year-old season. He was able to discover her worth as a racehorse much quicker. However, Ruth Quinn was personally concerned this might deny the public the opportunity to see great racemares fulfilling long careers or from going chasing.

In favour of earlier racing and feeling the Irish-bred horse was no different to its French counterpart, Mullins cited Douvan as a prime example. “He is enormous, 17.2hh and he hasn’t grown an inch since he came to me. If he was in Ireland he would have been put by and only just starting in point-to-points.”

Mullins wondered how long it would take to introduce three-year-old fillies races to the NH programme. Ruth Quinn was positive, recalling how quickly a concerted effort led to the current programme, but didn’t want to “run before we can walk” and wanted to ensure the horses were there first.

“We are all aware of the compelling veterinary evidence of the benefits of starting horses younger,” she agreed. “Three-year-old bumpers are meeting our expectations in a traditional slot from autumn onwards. The prospect of seeing that develop into a significant juvenile programme for fillies is quite daunting, but we would have to do it as a stepped development.”

Jason Morris, however, conceded that in Ireland it was a struggle to fill four-year-old bumpers and there had been no real support for the idea of three-year-old bumpers. “Would there just be a rush to buy horses in France, the market is there?” he wondered. “It would have to be developed on a progressive basis because it could impact negatively on the Irish breed.”

Quinn added that the mandatory staging of one mares race for every three days’ racing held by all British racecourses had been a positive step and field sizes vindicated the ratio. Increasing this to one for every two fixtures staged would be considered in the future.

Changing with the times

“I think we’re being forced into a situation of having to change,” noted Peter Hickey. “If we want to change the programme it will mean changing everything, selling at two years. It would help breeders, so a mare would be starting her stud career at six and will have plenty of time to breed for you. We do need to go to the track earlier and go to stud earlier.

“Half of our NH foals are fillies and if a mare produces two or three fillies there’s very little chance to make her a broodmare, as it’s very hard to get a filly into training,” he added. He pointed out the existing gaps in the NH racing programme for fillies and said more mares races were needed, saying: “A trainer needs to be able to say to an owner I can run that filly whenever she’s ready.”

The gap in the programme for mares in certain months was also picked up on by Bryan Mayoh of the TBA, in the audience, who expressed surprise at the incomplete opportunities for mares throughout the Irish season. It was agreed by the panel that the new programme of blacktype for fillies and mares, and additional races staged, has had a significant impact in a very short space of time.

World Series

The panel was asked if there should be a world series in National Hunt and Mullins was definitely in favour, suggesting a two and a half mile hurdle would fit the necessary requirements. “The scope is there for racing to broaden our horizon and if we don’t internationalise National Hunt it’s going to get smaller and smaller and go the way of America, where they’re down to very little racing.

“In talking to their trainers there, the Americans would embrace our horses coming over. The Australians are passionate about British and Irish National Hunt and would love to get good horses out there.” Quinn agreed it was a terrific idea and she would love to see National Hunt on the world stage.

Filly foal concessions

Asked their opinion of a free return if a mare produces a filly, the two breeders on the panel had their doubts. “It’s encouraging mediocrity and doesn’t feed anything,” Walter Connors maintained.

“There is a demand from breeders now that stallion masters have to give concessions,” Michael Hickey observed. “What’s diluting the market is a €3,000 stallion bargained down to €1,000 and then getting a bad mare covered and diluting the breed.”

Speaking from the audience and aptly summarising the situation, Bryan Mayoh concluded: “Proactively we must start a blacktype programme and encourage fillies to race. The industry is based on a toss of the coin, you lose more on a filly than you make on a colt. We need to increase the number of mares races. It’s not a question of whether to or can we fill them – we have to do it.”