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Worrying Trends in Racecourse Attendance in the UK. Time for Soul- Searching, Rethink and Renewal?

“There is far too much dull and dreary racing: uncompetitive, small fields; weak product on too many race days; high cost and over-charging; declining loyalty of local customers; and expensive food and drink. It’s hardly surprising that race day attendance is in decline.”

Off to Dublin at the weekend for the sensational Festival at Leopardstown. This was a highlight of the racing year for me in 2018 and I enjoyed it even more than Cheltenham, Aintree and the York Ebor meeting. Every race was exciting, field sizes huge, prize-money massive, but what really made the difference was the animated, knowledgeable and passionate crowd, which was a joy to behold.

There seemed to be a huge buzz in Ireland, probably helped by the sensational victory against France in the rugby. This year it's England's turn to raise the excitement levels. I'll be watching the end of the game in a super wine bar, The Grange in Foxrock, and the atmosphere is bound to be electric. Bring it on, and may my liver survive! It could be detox next week.

Racing without passion, emotion, rousing stories, cherished horses and animated crowds is a soulless experience. Unfortunately there are far too many racecourses and racedays which only provide joyless fare. Over the winter I've been to all the all-weather tracks to watch moderate horses fight it out in the cold and dark. Truly dismal. Indeed I had an unwelcome "first" at Southwell a week ago when I stood in the paddock as the only owner present for my race. Clearly all the other owners had given up hope. The horse disappointed and I left almost immediately, having been on the track for less than 20 minutes. Driving home, I reflected that I would be embarrassed to take a new owner there, as I can't believe they would stay in the game for very long. Southwell have actually improved the facilities for owners recently, and their O&T bar is a most pleasant and cosy room, but surely what really matters is the total raceday experience that lifts the spirits rather than depressing them. I'm afraid winter all-weather racing, and for that matter many other turf days, completely fails to do that.

So when the raceday attendance figures for 2018 were published recently, they weren't a total surprise. Back in 2015 the BHA published growth targets for racing against a 2014 baseline, one of which was for racecourse attendances to reach seven million by 2020. They have however declined for each of the last three years, with the most recent total 5.77m, the lowest this century. Average crowds fell to 3,924, with the median figure a mere 1,567. Racing may still be the #2 sport behind football in spectator terms, but there is no escaping the reality that it looks as though racecourses are going to undershoot on their 2020 attendance goal by 1.25m.

After these figures were published, social media was full of negative reactions and prescriptions: far too much dull and dreary racing; uncompetitive, small fields; weak product on too many racedays; high cost and overcharging; declining loyalty of local customers; expensive food; failure to provide modern facilities and easy access to the internet, etc.

There is one major encouraging trend which is that the big festivals and "marquee days" appear to be doing very well, and sometimes it's easy to think everything in racing is rosy when you attend a big day at Cheltenham or Leopardstown. One obvious route for racecourses is to identify the fixtures that they can develop into mini-festivals. I'd even propose that the Racecourse Association develop that strategically and identify festival fixtures across the country for every week of the year.

It's not as though there hasn't been a strategic approach to improving attendance. Back in 2015, "customer growth objectives" were developed, with racecourses committing to develop a stronger partnership with the then new broadcaster, ITV; the creation of a digital-led "Come Racing" campaign promoting a "kids go free" message; best practice guides for racecourses; RCA's leadership of an "Insight = Growth" project with data warehousing and bespoke planning to attract new customers, secure earlier ticket sales and increase customer retention. To be fair, several aspects of this strategy have been quite successful, particularly improvement in advance ticket sales to over two million.

However, there's no escaping the conclusion that the overall strategic plan has failed to meet its objectives. There is now a new Chief Executive at the RCA and it's time, again, to revive and renew the strategies and plans to boost attendance. My own plea is that strategy is not just a technocratic activity. It must contain initiatives that bring passion back into the sport, rather than just running it as a money-making, levy-generating, gambling-enhancing activity. We need strategy with soul.

