

# On the brink

**Newmarket trainer John Gosden has huge concerns about the way racing is heading – “a semi-private club irrelevant to modern society”**

*Words: Richard Griffiths | Photos: Arnhel de Serra*

**Y**et again the future of racing seems to find itself at an uncertain crossroads, with debate as to how it should be ‘branded’ and prize-money on the decline. How much does this concern you, as a professional who keeps a close eye on the way it is run?

Everybody has great concerns about the state of British racing – Flat racing, that is. Jump racing has made enormous progress over the last ten to 15 years. It has a very strong home-grown domestic product and a lot of that can be seen in the structure of its fixture list. It has this fantastic build up to Cheltenham and then just to finish that off you have got Aintree. So it has an incredible finale.

However, Flat racing is in a parlous state. It needs a properly structured fixture list that creates interest that puts it in the public eye.

**So how do you go about creating that “properly structured fixture list”?**

Right now we are in this unworkable situation where the number of fixtures is increasing – ten years ago it was 1,200, next year it will be over 1,500 – and yet the levy, our main source of funding, is in rapid decline. The talk is about £57 million in prize-money next year from the levy and I don’t think we will be able to hold the line at that for very long. This is down from £62.5 million. We are yet to see the impact of internet betting moving offshore.

So it becomes quite clear that with more and more fixtures and less and less money, there is no way you can finance the fixture list as it is.

Therefore, we have no choice but to make

radical changes. We have got to set up key fixtures – core fixtures – throughout the year. These fixtures would help promote racing. Make it clear to people that it is a very exciting sport.

Underneath that core tier, you have got to have a second tier of racing. Like the core fixtures, these would be funded through the levy, racecourses, sponsors and owners.

And then we would have a third tier of fixtures funded outside of the levy.

If fixtures are not making money for the levy, they have got to go. Instead, they can be funded through a commercial relationship between a racecourse and the betting industry. If the betting industry wants them for slots in their shops, fine. The question is, ‘What are they going to pay for them?’

The game has shifted and the money lies more in the picture rights. We have seen what has happened with Arena – they have just done a five-year deal with SIS worth £106 million. Northern Racing, similarly, will break away with their own picture rights deals. They didn’t secure all those tracks for the fun of it. The danger is that all the picture rights money goes straight to racecourses; it is outside of the levy circle and they have no obligations whatsoever to put any of it back into prize-money.

**The way you talk about Arena’s picture rights deal, it’s not as if you blame a racecourse group for doing such a deal?**

No, it was inevitable. But I don’t have any problem talking to Arena and saying, ‘Right, you have got this money, where is it going as



**“Flat racing in Britain is in terminal decline now – I really do think it is that bad”**

I think it is in terminal decline right now. I think it is *that* bad. I’m not going back on ‘what if, what if’ and ‘did we have the right leadership?’ We are where we are right now – September 2009. But we have got one year to 18 months to restructure this fixture list, to make it really work, or we are just a marginalised game of the past.

Three years time will be way too late. So let’s get hold of the fixture list and completely radicalise it. Just do it.

**Is this a message that you think is understood by racing’s leadership?**

No. I don’t think they get it. I find them too detached; there are too many people who do not understand racing. I think they should be at the coalface more. Come and watch the workings of a stable, come and watch us trying to get the whole show on the road, see what it costs. Go to stud farms and see the enormous cost of producing one horse capable of racing.

I won’t name anybody specific because there is no point. Once that European court decision (the adverse data rights ruling of five years ago) came through, what financial levers have the BHA got? They don’t have any. They do, however, have the fixture list.

But I am profoundly concerned about the BHA budget. I see no reason for them to be in offices in London, for instance, moving at huge cost from Shaftesbury Avenue to Holborn. They should be out with Weatherbys at an industrial site in Wellingborough, right slap bang middle of the country. Or Newmarket, or Lambourn. You don’t need all those high overheads, at London rates. Most of it is paid for by levy money and racehorse owners. A BHA budget of £34 million is profligate.

**When it comes to establishing an elite tier of fixtures, what kind of number are we talking about?**

It’s not going to be that many. You are talking about quality here. But we need something that makes sense, some structure.

What you see in the papers now is this great amorphous mass of racing. You see cards written in tiny print, in order to get them all shoved in. Personally, I’d axe half of them and have some more column space – space that could be used to talk about horses like Sea The ▶

regards prize-money?’

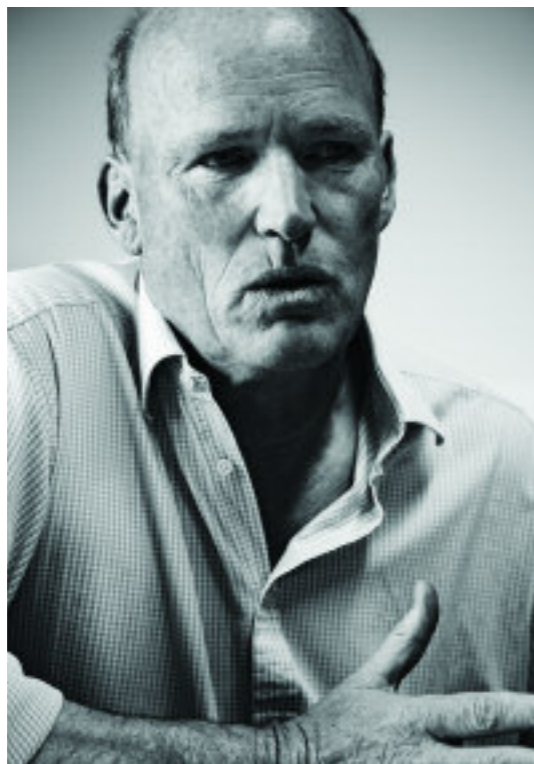
I don’t think this is such a problem. I think all courses want to attract some better horses and sometimes they get told by race-planning at the BHA that they can’t put on the racing they want because it clashes with somewhere else. You see a lot of complication with race-planning and I think it needs a good kick up the backside. Many racecourses, like Chester, are frustrated that they cannot expand and improve the quality of their programme. Also, be aware, that the OFT wanted a more open and commercial market for fixtures between racecourses. This has not happened. Fixture bidding has been collusive and mismanaged.

**Do you think this third tier of fixtures would help solve the dilemma between giving owners and their horses sufficient opportunities at all levels, while at the same time ensuring what prize-money there isn’t spread too thinly?**

If people want to race their horses and they enjoy it, that’s not a problem. You don’t want to legislate against bad horses. But if the betting industry wants them, they can pay for them by a commercial relationship with racecourses.

Unless we get some sense to this very quickly the game in this country will be gone. Racing will become a semi-private club, increasingly irrelevant to modern society. Don’t let anyone be fooled into thinking racing can afford to go down that road. It will soon be a dead duck if it does.

**So how quickly do you think racing has to move on this?**



**“We need a proper fixture list that will start to put the main contestants together”**

horse, not nearly enough, and it's about time we did. Racing is an entertainment industry, not a subsidiary of the betting industry.

Here we read too much into the betting all the time, it seems like the tail wags the dog. I know we are not running a church but, equally, racing should not be seen as just a betting medium. The big bookmakers want the racing product at the cheapest price, then work the maximum margin.

I think Mark Johnston has made the point: we have made ourselves beholden to the betting industry – they want this slot filled, they want that slot filled, they want to drag people across the country to run for peanuts. And then what do they do? Siphon off our clients and get them on the machines, FOBTs. They will divert their customers away from horseracing because they won't have to pay any levy – at a time when prize-money is falling at a faster rate than ever before. And now, with the exception of Coral, they are moving offshore to avoid paying the levy. They are public companies whose duty is to themselves and their shareholders, not racing.

And we haven't even started to see the worst of it yet. Already I go through *The Racing Calendar* and put a line through a card, I just won't go there: it's too far away, too expensive to get to and the prize-money is lousy. From the owner's perspective, travel costs outweigh any benefit.

**How often do you find yourself doing that?**

One in four meetings. I don't even look at the races. And I will tell you, it will soon be one in two. I am not prepared to cost an owner that much money, to drive that far to run in a race that offers £1,000 to the winner.

**There is always a lot of comment about how Britain offers the best racing in the world. Can we afford to take that for granted, especially when we have recently had a Group 1 race like the Juddmonte with no home-trained runners?**

Take the Derby this year, we finished eighth with Debussy. Crowded House (in sixth) was the only home-trained horse to finish in front of us. Is that healthy? Of course it's not. It's gravely concerning.

I won a Group 2 in France with Debussy worth £220,000 to the winner. What's the

Stars, probably the best horse I have seen since I came back to this country 20 years ago.

Friends of mine from university, they have no interest in racing. To them it's a bit stale, it doesn't have a shape or form. It doesn't have anything to capture the imagination.

And quite frankly how do you capture the attention when you have got all those cards in there? It's just like reading the financial lists. Unless you own stocks and shares, you turn the page over quick.

Racing has a lot to offer but we make the worst of ourselves and at the moment we are failing the sport. We have got to re-shape ourselves and produce a proper fixture list that will start putting the main contestants together. That is what attracts people and that is what will filter through the system; people will start going racing everywhere, not just the main meetings. We had a shock this year when the BBC said horseracing was of little interest to their audience. Now Channel 4, subsidised by the Maktoum family, are compressing all the races into the early afternoon. What does that tell you about the appeal of our sport?

**Do you think there is enough focus on the horse itself when people talk about promoting racing?**

There is none at all. The horse gets completely forgotten. I will go out now in the morning and you see the horses pulling up from a canter, a string of horses silhouetted against the skyline, with the mist...I tell you, it's a stunning sight.

Horsing is a truly beautiful spectacle. We never sell it, we never make anything of the

point of staying in this country? We've also won two Group 1s in Ireland this year and you target those races now. You don't stay here, it's not worth it.

**So how on earth do you persuade people to own horses in Britain?**

Right now it is nigh on impossible. I bought one on spec at Doncaster (at the St Leger sale) and a month later I haven't had a bite for it.

We are continually relying on people who are not necessarily that young and they are in it because they have been in racing for years. But who is going to replace them? That is a problem that has been happening in America and it is going to happen here. The former generation of Hollywood all used to go to the track. I remember Liz Taylor, Cary Grant used to have pieces of horses with me, a couple of famous film-makers and producers. The film industry now? They're not interested. That's because racing in America, like here, hasn't been marketed well. It's just seen as an old-fashioned betting medium.

**How widespread do you think are the concerns that you have expressed?**

I think we are all aware of it. Newmarket has had a lot of horses in it due to overproduction. I remember that in the last major recession of 1973/74 horse numbers dropped. You suddenly start staring at empty boxes and stable

staff start getting laid off. It'll come, right across the country. All Newmarket trainers talk about this and we have enormous concerns that this industry doesn't have a solid enough future for us to run our businesses.

**So what's the next step?**

In the end, you can't have a theatre without a play and you can't have a play without actors and actresses. So the strength lies with the owners and the trainers and the jockeys and the stable staff. We don't have to race if we don't want to. Why am I putting a line through one track in four? Because I have had enough.

I am aware that a lot of tracks want competitive racing. But if they want that, they are going to have to do considerably better by us. Remember that most years it averages that 80% of horses are rated below 80 – that does not leave many quality horses to go round.

There are ways of improving racing. I have always preferred sitting down with people and talking common sense first. I am not talking about boycotts or strikes – we did that once, we did it for a reason, to get attention, which we did. I have no intention of trying to start anything else of that nature. But you cannot go on assuming that everything will be paid for by owners and that all the shows can continue to be put on for crumbs or peanuts. Sorry, it won't.

Market forces need to come into play and ▶



**“Racing hasn't been marketed well. It is seen as an old-fashioned betting medium”**

**“Bookmakers are looking after themselves. Horseracing needs to do the same thing”**

then you will see tracks fighting to get the right horses. They want to attract the good horses. From the Group 1s to a really solid 0-90 handicap, they want good, competitive racing and they can get that in a more commercial world. Right now a lot of the tracks that want to do that are being fettered, but on the other hand a lot of them are going along for an easy ride, not doing a damn thing other than soaking up Levy Board money.

If racecourses are making a good turn out of picture rights money – hey, back into prize-money. Simple as that. If not...don't expect to see us. We'll go elsewhere.

**Do you think that possibly a very important part of planning for the future is being overlooked? Namely that future generations of the Maktoum family and other Arab investors may not continue with the level of support and investment that we are currently seeing. Do you think racing is prepared for this?**

I will say it and I don't like saying it: I don't think you will ever see that level of investment again, be it from the Maktoum family, Juddmonte Farms, or other international owners. They are racing their own horses and supplying hundreds of horses into the horse population. Horses are part of their psyche, part of their lives. They are deep in their culture and that is very important. But their children will have other interests, they have been brought up in a different, more modern world and so there will be a shift of interest.

The next generation will operate on a much reduced scale. There is no doubt about that. It is common sense. And I am not trying to make a large noise about this. I am just stating the way things are.

You won't see the same number of horses in training, the number of broodmares, the number of stallions, the number of farms, the thousands of acres of land, the thousands of people employed. I think a lot of people find it convenient not to face the reality of what's happening. You have got one group of people, and a group in Ireland, holding up the market. There is a limit to how long that can go on, be it in Europe or America.

**The longer this interview has gone on, the more your very real frustration is coming**



**through. You clearly feel the clock is ticking...**

We are in a salvage situation now. This isn't the time to sit on our backsides and have 15 more committees. This is a time for sitting down over the table and talking straight to each other. I am not really interested in talking to endless committees or another quango. I have done that.

There are whole layers of people up there in Holborn, formerly Shaftesbury Avenue, who seem to operate at that level (of endless committees). We are down at the coalface and don't have time for that – we're all trying to keep a business on the road.

But I am very clear of the need to sit down and restructure our fixtures: get the core fixtures in – Premier racing – with secondary racing and after that a third level outside the levy that people can enjoy and be part of, and satisfy the betting industry if they are prepared to pay. We have to promote racing as a sport, an entertainment, a day out, a spectacle that is attractive and interesting. Follow the key horses. Has Sea The Stars got the public recognition he deserves? Has he had the press and exposure a horse of his stature warrants?

Of course betting is a key ingredient of racing, but it is not the only vision. Right now, enslaving ourselves solely to its demands has led us down a blind alley of diminishing revenues.

We have to act now. We have got to get on to a commercial footing with the racecourses. The betting industry has already told us what they are doing. They are looking after themselves, not horseracing. Horseracing needs to start looking after itself. ■