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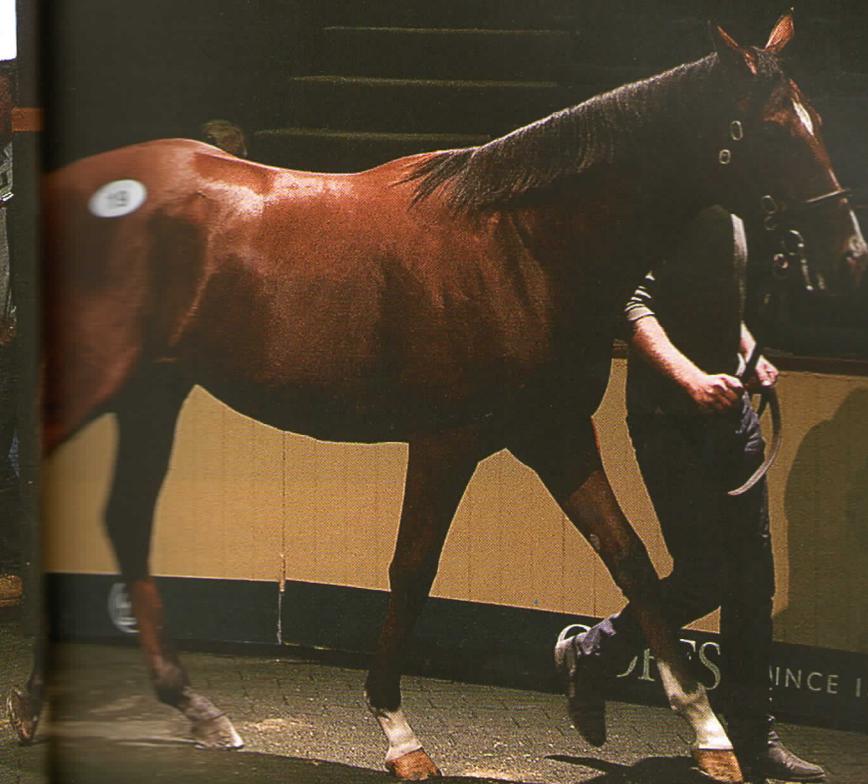
FOCUS ON THE FLAT

Are commercial breeders targeting the right market?



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INCE 1866





A recent thoroughbred industry seminar held in County Tipperary in Ireland, organised by the Irish Thoroughbred Breeders' Association, gathered together a panel of trainers, bloodstock agents, consignors, stallion masters, and breeders. While it will come as no surprise that the panel appeared unanimous in believing the sales ring is the Derby Day for commercial breeders, what is less expected was the belief of the panel that such commercialism may be detrimental to the breed.

WORDS: LISSA OLIVER PHOTOS: GOFFS, CAROLINE NORRIS

If bloodstock agents, stallion masters, and trainers are concerned by the number of commercially bred, precocious two-year-old types, and the European Pattern Committee has already incentivised the breeding and racing of staying horses, will the marketplace trend change drastically in the coming sales season or have we already affected the modern breed by injecting too much speed?

"It's economics," Irish trainer Ger Lyons points out. "Harzand, a dual Derby winner, is dropped back to 10 furlongs to prove himself. You see people breeding for the sales ring, that's their Derby Day and it's my problem after that."

The world rankings show that Australia produces the best sprinters, and the country will soon host the world's richest turf race, a 1200m sprint, but Europe remains the primary international source of top-class middle-distance performers, and British trainer Mark Johnston is adamant Europe should promote that and do what it is best at in terms of thoroughbred production. "We are bombarded by speed and speed-testing and breeders trying to get rid of the TT gene (Equinome-identified genomes) when Galileo, the greatest stallion in the world, is TT!" Johnston protests.

He also points out some sombre figures for thoroughbred breeders, having concluded that the vast majority of the 50 yearlings he buys each year were bought for less than their production cost. "50% of black-type winners are out of black-

type-winning mares, which equates to 50% of black-type winners are out of 2% of broodmares. Those figures were true 30 years ago and still stand now."

If we take those percentages a step further we see that, excluding races restricted to two-year-olds only, of 334 European Group races, close to 27% (89 races) are 2000m and 71 races (almost 22%) are 1600m. 70 races (21%) are 2400m. The 2% black-type broodmare population now compacts quite sharply and narrows down to the classic middle-distance performer. And yet, as Lyons so succinctly pointed out, the male 2400m performer is more likely to find a career as a National Hunt stallion than find a place in the Flat sire ranks.

The Pattern race system is designed to identify the very best racehorses, and

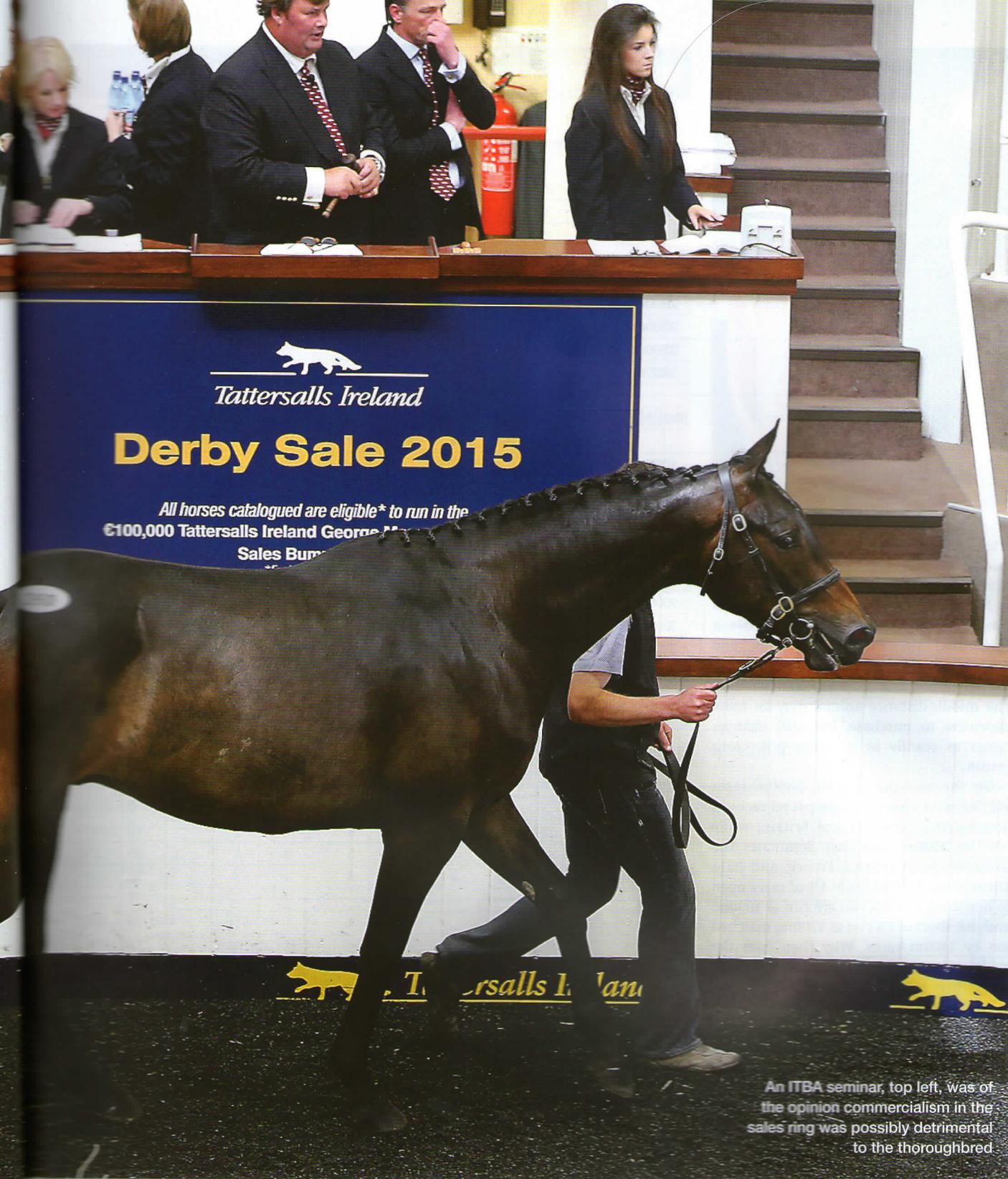
“Harzand, a dual Derby winner, is dropped back to 10 furlongs to prove himself. You see people breeding for the sales ring, that's their Derby Day and it's my problem after that”

Ger Lyons



there is no doubt from the current Pattern that the emphasis remains on the classic 1600m-2400m middle-distance performer, forming 69% of the Group races in fact. With 13% of races run at 1200m or less, it seems the fashion at stud doesn't correspond at all to the fashion of the racecourse.

Damien Burns of Lodge Park Stud, breeder of Derby winner New Approach, has offered the view that some leading buyers last year somewhat distorted Tattersalls Book 2 by going after more speedy types than they would normally



An ITBA seminar, top left, was of the opinion commercialism in the sales ring was possibly detrimental to the thoroughbred

target. "A huge amount of sprinter sires are going to stud on the back of that and I just wonder will that continue?" he asks. "This is in stark contrast to the Horses In Training sale, where it is the stayers who are making the money."

Jason Morris, Director of Racing at Horse Racing Ireland, is one of those involved in the evolution of the European Pattern, and he agrees that there has been a growing trend in speed-orientated breeding. "Particularly in Britain there's a focus on speed," he observes. "We're working on

boosting opportunities for Flat stayers and this year sees the first running of a two-mile Group 3, the Loughbrown Stakes. The Curragh Cup has been upgraded to Group 2 and a new three-year-old opportunity has been created as a lead-in to the Queen's Vase. It's the desire of the racing authorities throughout Europe to ensure the staying race programme remains relevant.

"Changes to the sprint programme were simpler as it was just a case of filling in the missing gaps, particularly creating early opportunities for three-year-olds,

who were having to compete against their elders. We were simply catering for an existing population. The staying programme presented more challenges as we are trying to encourage breeders to produce more stayers and encourage more stayers in training and the retention of stayers in training, rather than seeing them exported."

Is there a need for such encouragement? Concerns have been raised by professionals in all sectors of the industry that too many horses are being retired to stand at stud

DISTRIBUTION OF GROUP RACES FOR 3YOS AND ABOVE

BRITAIN

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1000m		1	1	1	2	1	1			7	5.9%
1200m		2	2	2	4		1	2		13	11%
1400m		3	1	2	3	3	2	1		15	12.7%
1600m		2	4	6	4	3	3	2		24	20.3%
2000m	1	3	5	2	3	3		2		19	16%
2400m		1	3	8	6	2	3	3		26	22%
2800m			2	1	2	1	2			8	6.8%
3000m		1	1		1	1		1		5	4.2%
3200m										0	0%
3400m								1		1	0.8%
										118	

IRELAND

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1000m				1			1			2	3.8%
1200m			1	2		1	1			5	9.6%
1400m		2	1	2	1	1		1		8	15.4%
1600m	1		5			1	3			10	19.2%
2000m		2	5	2	2	2	4			17	32.7%
2400m				2	2	1				5	9.6%
2800m			1		1	1	1			4	7.7%
3000m										0	0%
3200m							1			1	1.9%
3400m										0	0%
										52	

FRANCE

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1000m			2	1			1	1		5	5.3%
1200m		1			1	2		1		5	5.3%
1400m		2		1	1		1	1		6	6.4%
1600m		3	3	3	2	4	1	2		18	19.0%
2000m	1	4	9	4	4	5	3	4	1	35	37.2%
2400m			1	4	1	4	3	3		16	17.1%
2800m					1					1	1.1%
3000m						1	1	1		3	3.2%
3200m			2				1	1		4	4.3%
4000m								1		1	1.1%
										94	

GERMANY

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1000m										0	0%
1200m		1			1	1				3	7.5%
1400m										0	0%
1600m		2	3	1	3	1	1	1		12	30%
2000m		1	2	1	1	2		1	1	9	22.5%
2400m		1	1	2	3	2	3	1	1	14	35%
2800m								1		1	2.5%
3000m										0	0%
3200m			1							1	2.5%
3400m										0	0%
										40	

and the grass is much later, so our breeding season is later. The late-maturing horse is much better suited to our season. It is all connected. The German industry and cycle protects the classic thoroughbred who will contest the Classic races and I feel it is important for the breeder to protect the classic horse."

Bischoff-Lafrentz is passionate about the horse and feels very strongly about protecting and continuing traditional bloodlines. "Of course breeding only for the sales ring is harmful to the breed," she says. "I feel very sorry for the horses themselves. They are treated like goods and thrown away. If they can only race as two-year-olds



after racing only at two and that proven middle-distance performers are being shunned by Flat breeders and marketed as National Hunt sires. Yet the major sales catalogues show a healthy balance between sprint-bred sires, first-season sires, and established middle-distance producers, and the clearance rate matches that balance. The middle-distance animal may be more expensive to purchase, but still changes hands as readily as its more precocious cousin.

On the racecourse itself, 2400m races are the most common Group-level races in Scandinavia, Germany, and Britain, while it's the 2000m race that dominates the Group scene in Ireland, France, and Italy. Throughout Europe, only 4% of races open to horses older than two are run at 1000m, and just short of 9% run at 1200m, matched too by 1400m races. Why then does the middle-distance horse appear fashionable everywhere but at stud?

We need to go back to the sales ring, where a quick return is often sought on an investment. Buyers may dream of a Derby winner, but are they prepared to wait? The real dream is of a reasonable investment and the earliest possible chance of a day out at the races. In Germany, where the two-year-old programme is restricted due to climate and a later foaling season, the dream remains the traditional goal of winning the Derby, and the prize money is in place to ensure those dreams continue.

Heike Bischoff-Lafrentz, owner of Gestüt Görlsdorf, tells us, "The goal for the breed, as I understand it, is winning the Derby or Oaks or a Classic race. Of course you can breed a sprinter and there are some very good sprint races, but breeding horses with stamina is traditional.

"In Germany, the Derby has the best prize money and no sprint can compare, so breeding a middle-distance horse is very much encouraged. We also have a very different climate to Britain and Ireland

what happens to them after they have finished racing? I would not like to breed a precocious horse that will not train on and have a long career.

"Breeding a commercial horse and using only fashionable stallions is unfair for the breeder and for the buyer. The racehorse should be tough and sound and improve with age, and for me this is the worry if we lose this. Fashion really kills the breed. So many breeders send their mares to a first season sire, when as a breeder we should be doing the best for our mare. Only using a first season sire is very tricky and they can't all be a success."

Perhaps we should promote the sport as a longer-term emotional investment, as Bischoff-Lafrentz advocates. "The German breeder is not interested in winning one or two races, they want to see their horses in the Derby and continuing to race at four and even at five. It is much more fun to be with a horse for more than just a year."

She warns of the long-term effect that following fashion and the whim of the sales ring may have. "Breeding sprinters and precocious horses will change the breed. A sprinter has a different heart, different muscles, and different physiology, and using more of those stallions will definitely change the breed," she insists.

So perhaps then what is needed is a change to the nursery of racing, and the British two-year-old programme did receive a successful overhaul last year that will be built upon this season. This followed complaints from trainers and owners that two-year-olds who make a winning appearance in the early part of the season had very few opportunities to run again until the start of nursery handicaps in mid-summer. From a spectator point of view, too, those limited opportunities have a tendency to attract only small fields and are therefore, not high on the list of desired programming with most racecourses.

In 2013 the race conditions and penalty structure of novice races in Britain were modified and a minimum value of £10,000 introduced. This failed to have the desired effect, with field sizes remaining small and attracting only an average of 4.83 runners per race from 2013 to 2015. Highlighting the lack of competitiveness, the average starting price of the favourite was 10/11.

As a result, the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) announced that it would trial a new approach to the Flat two-year-old novice and maiden race programme for 2016. Ruth Quinn, Director of International Racing and Racing Development, revealed of the initial idea at the time, "The BHA has been in consultation with trainers on this matter over the course of a few years and several different proposals have been raised during this time. We should have a system in place that encourages progression and, as things stand, that development programme for two-year-olds in the first half of the season is not working."

Therefore, 175 (85%) maiden races were

DISTRIBUTION OF GROUP RACES FOR 3YOS AND ABOVE

ITALY

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL		
1000m										0	0%	
1200m				1					1	2	8.7%	
1400m										0	0%	
1600m		2	1					2	1	1	7	30.4%
2000m		1	1	1				1	2	1	7	30.4%
2400m			3	1				1	1		6	26.1%
2800m									1		1	4.3%
3000m											0	0%
3200m											0	0%
3400m											0	0%
											23	

SWEDEN

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1200m					1					1	33.3%
1400m										0	0%
1600m										0	0%
2000m			1							1	33.3%
2400m								1		1	33.3%
										3	

NORWAY

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1400m					1					1	33.3%
1600m										0	0%
2000m							1			1	33.3%
2400m					1					1	33.3%
										3	

DENMARK

	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL	
1400m										0	0%
1600m										0	0%
2000m										0	0%
2400m					1					1	100%

TOTAL

1000m	14	4.3%
1200m	29	8.7%
1400m	30	9%
1600m	71	21.7%
2000m	89	26.6%
2400m	70	21%
2800m	15	4.6%
3000m	8	2.4%
3200m	6	1.8%
3400m	1	0.3%
4000m	1	0.3%
	334	

SCANDINAVIA (as a whole)

	May	June	July	August	September
1200m			1		
1400m			1		
1600m					
2000m	1			1	
2400m		1	1		1

converted to novice contests between the start of the 2016 Flat turf season and the beginning of July, when nursery handicaps began. The idea behind this was to replicate the approach to the National Hunt novice hurdle programme. The high number of maiden races converted to novice races was hoped to alleviate the risk of trainers continuing to run horses in maidens in order to avoid competing with winners.

Horses bought at auction were still provided with the opportunity to run

in novice auction events and were not therefore forced to take on winners of open maidens. Penalty structures were watched closely throughout the trial period and the BHA adjusted race conditions where necessary, when evidence indicated that a specific advantage was being given either to winners or to maiden horses in the new events.

During the trial period from March to July of 2016, the percentage of median auction and auction races remained



unchanged, at 30% of the number of novice and maiden races. The penalty for winners in novice races was 7lb for each win in novice auction races, while in open novices it was 4lb (1.8kg) for each auction race win and 7lb (3.2kg) for each win in all other races. There were no allowances for unraced horses. This allowed winners of auction and median auction races more opportunities to take on similar horses in novice events, rather than being forced to run in open novice and conditions races.

Possibly to the surprise of many, the trial proved highly successful. Rupert Arnold, Chief Executive of the National Trainers Federation, says of the success, "There was a divergence of opinion amongst trainers about the conversion of such a large proportion of Flat maiden races to novice races for the first three months of the 2016 season. Now the races have been run there is a wide consensus that the new system has worked well. There had been doubts that the additional opportunities for winners would be taken up but it's good to see more winners have run again. Getting the penalties right was always going to be a 'best guess' but the strike rate of previous winners suggests the penalty structure is about right, and the programme dovetails with the introduction of nurseries in July. It has been a good start, with the chance to improve it further with some minor tweaks."

The figures have borne out that positive consensus. Seventy-five previous winners

ran again, compared to only 35 in 2015, an increase of 53%. 20 of the 75, or 27% of the winning two-year-olds, were successful on their next appearance, which is comparable to the 23% in 2015. Against expectations, the number of individual winning horses did not decrease from 2015; although only 12 more horses won twice, 14 additional races were added to the programme.

Field size numbers also increased significantly, with the average field in novice races increasing from 5.08 to 7.84 and the proportion of novice races with fewer than six runners falling from 62% to 15%. The proportion of races with eight or more runners increased similarly from 15% to 53%. Although overall field sizes across all two-year-old races was marginally down from 8.33 to 8.05, there were 14 more races run in 2016, resulting in an increase of 56 runs in total (up 3.27%).

"We're encouraged by how the trial has

“Under the new system, we have seen 40 extra horses who won in the first half of the season reappear in another race”

Richard Wayman

performed in its first year and we plan to repeat it during the same period in 2017," says Richard Wayman, Chief Operating Officer for the BHA. "Looking back over recent years, there was a clear consensus amongst horsemen that the two-year-old programme did not support progression for those juveniles that won in the early part of the season. The fact that in 2016, under the new system, we have seen 40 extra horses who won in the first half of the season reappear in another race provides a clear indication that progress has been made.

"It is early stages yet and large-scale changes such as this should always be given time to bed in before any conclusions are made, so we will continue to monitor the performance of these races in future years and, if necessary, make any changes in communication with our stakeholders. The early signs, however, are promising." To such an extent, in fact, that the BHA has allowed the trial to be rolled out for the full 2017 Flat season. A further 442 maiden races (82% of maiden races) from July to the end of the season have been converted to novice contests, and there are increased opportunities at 1400m and 1600m in the autumn, with a corresponding reduction in races over sprint distances.

Among those trainers who originally expressed some scepticism was Ralph Beckett, who now concurs, "The consensus of opinion is that it worked, and has worked better than anyone might have guessed. Even the biggest advocate of novice

“The consensus of opinion is that it worked, and has worked better than anyone might have guessed”

Ralph Beckett

“races couldn't have hoped for such positive feedback. I think this has been largely due to the structure of the penalties. There had been concerns about a number of horses farming the novice races, which hasn't happened, because it has proved difficult to win a novice with a penalty and isn't as straightforward a task as it might seem. We had a subsequent Group 3 winner who couldn't win a novice under a penalty. My personal view is that it has worked very well and it's been positive for everyone.”

Andrew Balding, too, who wouldn't normally be chasing two-year-old wins, agrees that the changes have had a positive effect. “We had more two-year-olds last year than we would usually have and I didn't notice anything detrimental from the changes made to the programme and I think it has been quite positive,” he remarks.

Away from the direct coalface, one man who has been professionally noting two-year-olds for form guides for many a season is writer Peter Corbett. Corbett advocated this change over a decade ago and would like to see it taken a step further. “The problem trainers faced were with juveniles winning first time out: where to run next? This was addressed but only in respect of early season runners, as the novice races ceased when the nurseries began,” he points out. “No consideration was given to winning debutants later in the year over seven or eight furlongs. These later developing sorts are just as in need of experience outside Pattern and nursery races. So it's right that the programme of novice races should continue throughout the year.”

An even better solution, he believes, would be to abolish maidens for juveniles and replace them with condition or plate races. “These would be open to all two-year-olds that had not won three races. This would allow juveniles to develop at the pace decided by the trainer, who would not be forced to run in black-type races before the horse was ready. Such races could continue for three-year-olds until the end of June the following year. This would also eliminate the problem of small fields in the old-style condition stakes.”

Encouraging the late-maturing juvenile and providing end-of-season opportunities is a welcome addition in the reshaping of the two-year-old programme and will hopefully underpin the staying programme for older horses.

DISTRIBUTION OF GROUP RACES FOR 2YOS

BRITAIN

	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL
1000m	2	1	1	2	1		7
1200m	2	4	2	6			14
1400m		2	3	5	2		12
1400m							
1600m				2	3		5
1600m							
2000m							0

IRELAND

	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL
1000m							0
1200m	2	2	1				5
1200m							
1400m			3	3			6
1600m			1	2			3
1600m							
2000m					1		1
2000m							

FRANCE

	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL
1000m		2		1	1		4
1000m							
1200m			2		2		4
1200m							
1400m			1	1	2	1	5
1400m							
1600m				2	3		5
1600m							
2000m					1	1	2
2000m							

GERMANY

	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL
1000m							0
1200m							0
1400m			1				1
1600m					2	1	3
1600m							
2000m							0

ITALY

	June	July	August	September	October	November	TOTAL
1000m							0
1200m	1					1	2
1400m							0
1600m					2		2
2000m					1		1

Beckett points out, “There has been a lot written recently about the bias towards speedy two-year-old types, but my own view is that we've been going this way for quite some time. The OFT (Office of Fair Trading) ruling in 2004 gave racecourses more autonomy, so they pushed more and more towards that fill, rather than holding a balanced programme.

The number of middle-distance horses being bred probably hasn't dropped significantly, but the programme has been geared more towards the sprinter-miler type. The race programme generally is undergoing significant change, so both issues are now being addressed and hopefully more middle-distance horses will be bred.” ■