LETTERS

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Arrogant to claim this is in racing's best interests

HOW utterly arrogant of Jockey Club Racecourses, in trying to sell off Kempton, to insist it is acting in the best interests of racing; and how equally insensitive to suggest an all-weather track at Newmarket is a worthy exchange.

The clandestine machinations of the Jockey Club in springing its decision on a wholly unsuspecting racing world indicate the lengths it will have gone to in order to keep things quiet.

It will have foreseen the inevitable uproar in jumping circles and clearly set about presenting its outcome as a fait accompli. Moreover, its plan to shift the void left by Kempton to Sandown is manifestly unsound, with the vulnerability of the Esher track to wet weather.

It is a rich irony that by far the best hope of the JCR putsch being kicked into touch is that Ian Harvey, leader of the relevant Spelthorne Borough Council, is reported to be vehemently opposed to any development scheme that impacts on the green belt.

Suffice to say, with JCR reaching decisions like this in such a manner, those who really do have racing's best interests at heart must in future sleep with both eyes wide open.

Paul Newton
Dedham, Colchester

Shaking my confidence

THE furore over the proposed closure of Kempton Park indicates both a worrying lack of communication between the Jockey Club and those involved within the sport, along with a very real fear over the financial viability of racing in Britain in the next decade.

The Jockey Club needs to look at ways of sustaining the long-term financing of racecourses, but this has to be done working in conjunction with those who are in the front line in the sport, seeking their views before any game-changing announcements are made.

The industry's most respected and experienced figures have been taken by complete surprise by this week's news, which the Jockey Club has kept very much to itself, and this shakes my confidence in the BHA too, as it is the sport's governing body.

It also begs the question: are racing's finances in such a perilous state now that racecourse sales are considered the primary option to raise funds?

David Snushall
Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire

Build jumps course too

HAVING originally considered Alastair Down's initial thoughts misguided, I have come to the conclusion that if Jockey Club Racecourses built a jumps course as well as an all-singing/dancing all-weather track at Newmarket, some sort of parity would be achieved.

Flat racing may be losing a venue but between the new proposed track at Newmarket and the planned turf circuit at Chelmsford it is gaining a course.

Jump racing is losing yet another course, a top-notch one at that. The Links, after all, was the site of Newmarket's long-lost jumps course, so returning jumping there would square the circle.

The Jockey Club cannot be protecting the sport if it is seen to protect Flat racing more vigorously than it does jumping.

A new jumps course at Newmarket might win them support that the present scheme will deny them.

Keith Knight
Bideford, Devon

Track such apart of jump racing's heart and soul

I WAS both shocked and furious to hear of the proposed closure of Kempton Park.

Kempton is the place my love for jump racing began and, indeed, I planned to have my ashes scattered there.

I have been at Kempton for nine King Georges and for Wednesday night meetings on the all-weather, as well as every other meeting I can get to. I simply love the course and have had some of the best times of my life there.

Has the Jockey Club conveniently forgotten the horrendous weather a couple of years ago when virtually no jump racing could take place and it was Kempton that came to the rescue, using the all-weather track so horses and trainers could at least run?

I live nearer to Sandown than Kempton and am well aware that the residents of Esher would not tolerate that course being made into 'affordable housing'.

The Sunbury area is highly populated already and it would find it hard to cope with another 3,000 homes, along with the population increase and associated traffic they would bring.

Sandown is a lovely course but would not be missed or mourned in the way Kempton will if the proposals go ahead.

Please, Jockey Club, do not do this. Listen to those of us who attend regularly and, together with Cheltenham, see these courses as where the true heart and soul of jump racing lives.

Mary Field
Ashtead, Surrey

Safe? I don't think so

HOW has the Kempton move got racing's best interests at heart?

1 Haydock's chase course was one of the best in the land, but it was sacrificed to make way for a second Flat course.

2 Nottingham's jumps course was closed down to make a second Flat course.

3 Warwick's Flat course was closed down because of a tricky bend that could have been cambered.

4 Courses charge sky-high prices to attend summer meetings to pay for pop concerts I don't want to see.

5 Now the news about Kempton.

Racing's heritage safe? I don't think so.

Graham Ely
Liverpool

Seek private investment

THE real question is not the arbitrary alternative to the closing of Kempton, but to ask what is the ideal future for the Jockey Club Racecourses tracks? Then, how does it best attract the resources – capital and people – to make that future a reality?

There are numerous private sources of capital in the shape of ultra-high net worth individuals looking for attractive long-term investments.

JCR chief Simon Bazalgette talked about further debt ceasing to be an attractive option. He would therefore be wise to focus on a compelling value proposition for growth equity partners, one that connects not just with the financial needs of ultra-high net worth investors (a four per cent yield) but the intellectual, social and cultural purpose of their wealth.

I am confident there is a better alternative if the Jockey Club is open-minded and serious about growth.

James Berkeley
London W1

NEWS

Chairman: shutting Kempton best for jumping in long term

By Jon Lees

THE chairman of Kempton racecourse yesterday said he would be sad to see the track close but argued the financial benefits from developing the site for housing were too great to ignore.

Nick Mustoe, who is also a jumps owner, said he had previously hoped the racecourse could continue operating while only the parts of the site not used for racing were built on, but now accepted that planning approval was more likely to be achieved if the whole 230-acre area was put forward.

The Jockey Club's announcement that the home of the King George VI Chase would be flattened to make way for 3,000 new homes, from which at least £100 million would be raised to help support a £500m investment in racing through the creation of a new all-weather track in Newmarket and major upgrade at Sandown, has divided opinion in racing.

Trainer Gary Moore joined the debate yesterday, labelling the decision "an absolute disgrace".

"Yes, of all the tracks in Britain, it's the one where I send the most runners, but that's for a reason," he said in his Betway blog. "It's a great and fair track for both Flat and National Hunt – it would be a huge blow if it was lost."

But Mustoe said: "I'm a big fan of National Hunt racing. I have a band of horses with Emma Lavelle and I have to say yes we'll all kind of miss it because it does add an extra dimension and, speaking personally as chairman for ten years, I find it sad.

"But I'm capable of seeing the bigger picture and seeing that the Jockey Club would do good things with that money.

"If that money is going to be used for the benefit of racing – and there are lots of issues over funding and prize-money and the fact we can't get enough owners because there is very little return – then maybe there is a better strategy going forward if we give up one course and it funds a lot of other things.

"It will be something the Jockey Club hasn't lightly come to. As a member as well, I know the quality of debate and feelings in the Jockey Club.

"They are not people who would be cavalier about this. If there's a lot of good that can be done you have to offset that against the bad of losing one course."

He added: "It's a good debate. It's a debate that's been had in the Jockey Club and they've come down in favour of thinking that the greater good is best served by closing and taking the money if that option is available."

Weird and wacky tales that embellish course's folklore

Although it is never likely to be put on the list of reasons against its proposed closure, few courses have borne witness to as many wacky episodes in recent years as Kempton. Here we recount some of the most shocking and bizarre moments to take place on what Mark Johnson once memorably called 'the avenue of heroes'

▸▸Santa pays a visit

December 2004

The 2004 King George was over before two out. The upstart Kicking King had cuffed Azertyuiop, who was having his first run at three miles and whose main concern by that point was fending off Kingscliff for second. What followed pricked the serenity like the killer being introduced in a slasher movie.

Kicking King's X-rated error at the last probably remains the finest example of the genre, despite Kauto Star's best efforts, but you might have been forgiven for being so engrossed in the finish that you missed the kicker, at least on first viewing. Once you see Santa Claus diving under the rails to avoid the leader as he hangs left, it's hard to think of the race any other way.

▸▸Apprentice fiasco

March 2008

Josephine Bruning, hand over mouth in amused embarrassment, came into the winner's enclosure having ensured her 15 minutes of fame with her maiden success on Sol Rojo.

She had been allowed by the three others apprentices in a 1m4f handicap to go 25 lengths clear on the hard-pulling outsider. They thought the horse had run away with her. Yet they failed to recognise that they were on the final circuit, and realised too late. Sol Rojo won by 16 lengths, then went on a lap of honour with Bruning helpless on top, at least proving the other three right up to a point.

▸▸Horse in the lake

January 2009

The John Best-trained Blue Warrior, ahead of his debut on a midwinter

Swanning about! Jockeys are forced to take evasive action

Wednesday night, broke through the stalls, crashed through the barriers and wound up in the course's lake, in total darkness.

Confusion reigned, not least for those watching at home, but the horse was eventually coaxed out by stalls handlers doing an admirable impression of a team of lifeguards.

▸▸Race set to music

July 2009

The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra picked the right track to play over the digibet.com Handicap, Rossini's unmistakable William Tell Overture, but if they could have chosen they would surely have picked just about any winning rider other than Ryan Moore. Asked about the initiative afterwards, the ever-saturnine Moore could only bring himself to complain that the music caused his mount to jink.

▸▸Man versus horse

June 2010

Those who remembered Jamie Baulch as an Olympic medal-winning athlete might have wondered why he challenged Peopleton Brook to a race over 100m, rather than his preferred 400m. The answer was soon pretty clear as the 58-rated sprinter, three starts from retirement as it turned out, beat him on the bridle.

"Horse beats man," said commentator Jim McGrath, almost managing to sound drawn in by the charade, which was at least run in the name of charity.

▸▸Hughes quits in protest

October 2011

Now we are far enough down the road to laugh about it, we can hopefully all agree that the defining moment of the autumn 2011 whip controversy came on Champions Day, when Champion Stakes-winning rider Christophe Soumillon attempted to cadge a taxi fare from Nick Luck on live television.

At the time it felt as though something much greater was at stake. Richard Hughes, after receiving a ten-day ban for breaking the seven-strike barrier for a second time, handed in his licence, saying "It's like telling Lionel Messi not to use his left foot".

That seems overwrought now, perhaps, but his actions along with the Soumillon debacle did most to force a vital softening from the BHA the following month.

▸▸Smith calls it wrong

June 2013

In his 13 years as a racecourse judge, Dave Smith gained minor notoriety from calling the result of a close finish even before all the 1.01 had been hoovered up on Betfair.

Barring superhuman abilities, the law of averages dictated that Smith was going to come unstuck at some point and it happened at Kempton when Extra Noble and Fire Fighting passed the post in unison in a seven-furlong maiden. It took a remarkably quick 50 seconds for Smith to declare a dead-heat, but five days to decide that, actually, Extra Noble had won by a nose. He was later relieved of his duties as a judge by the BHA.

▸▸Swans on the track

May 2014

If the swans that once took residence at Kempton were still there, perhaps the Queen could legitimately add her opposition to the site's proposed development. As it is they left not too long after the incident pictured above in an amateur riders' handicap hurdle, in which Dark Energy tripped over a straggler and unshipped Harry Beswick.

Keith Melrose

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