

More power to stewards

By Bruce Teague



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ONE of the strangest things about greyhound racing is that stewards don't have the power to disqualify or relegate fighters.

After all, a suspension is handed out on the spot so why not clean up the whole thing at the same time?

Every time you forget about this subject, up comes another incident where an honest dog is thumped by an offender and thereby loses the race. Of course, often neither dog then runs a place. But sometimes the fighter does get through.

Nothing generates a roar from the spectators so much as a fighter wreaking havoc. But one that wins prizemoney is just rubbing salt into the wound.

Some claim that trainers have the right to appeal and that placings should not be altered until that process finishes. Or that there's an underlying legal problem - although rewording the rules should take care of that. In any event, logic does not support the arguments.

First, once set, the placings for betting purposes can never be changed anyway (swab or no swab). A punter certainly has no chance of going back to the TAB for his rightful money.

Second, the fairness of

awarding a prize to a fighter is obviously suspect. It's also a poor advertisement for the industry.

Third, some claim it is hard to be sure of the outcome had the fighter not committed the breach. True, but that's why we have professional stewards.

Their job is to adjudicate in circumstances that are always difficult.

Elsewhere, galloping over the line at the trots can mean disqualification. At the thoroughbreds, shoving another horse out of the way can mean relegation and suspension.

Get out of your lane in athletics and you're gone straight away. All those penalties are effective immediately and all alter the placings.

In this context it's worthwhile considering the views of one of the most respected men in the business, John Shreck, former chief steward for both the AJC in Sydney and the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

Here's what he had to say in a Sydney Morning Herald article about handling protests at the gallops.

"Many fans talk about 'beyond reasonable doubt'. Forget about that straightaway," he advised. "If you go down (that) track a protest will never be upheld.

Nor will anyone ever be put out.

"I believe the test you should apply is on the balance of probabilities. That is, is it more probable than not that, but for the interference, the interfered horse would have finished ahead of the horse causing the trouble?"

Shreck further states that "as a steward, you should err on the side of caution but not be afraid to put your hand up".

It's reasonable to suggest that a doubt about fighting is little different to a doubt about interference to a galloper. In both cases, the professional opinion of the stewards is the key.

That said, maybe they are being too cautious.

Giving the "benefit of the doubt" to a trainer also means taking away from another trainer as well as from the customers, or some of them.

Again on the question of logic, it makes no sense to set free a "fighter" simply because it does not make head contact with the victim.

Both turning the head and deliberately veering off-course offer clear evidence of a crime - if not fighting, then non-chasing.

Unfortunately, the current rule

of racing concentrates on the offender alone and ignores the effect on seven other dogs, their trainers and thousands of customers. It needs changing. Finally, the question of an injury to a fighter may be a defence so far as suspensions are concerned but it's irrelevant for the current race - the dog either fought or it didn't.

STRAIGHT POPULARITY

Looking over the last year - or locally, over the first eight months of racing at the new Gold Coast track - the records show that 29% of Albion Park 520m runners had raced over the Ipswich 520m trip in the previous 45 days.

Some 42% over all distances at Ipswich. (There is some double counting in these figures but the relativities are valid enough).

By comparison, 19% had raced over the prime Gold Coast distance of 457m and 38% over all Gold Coast distances.

Next most popular was Capalaba where 17% had a run up the 366m straight track in that same 45 day period. That's an amazing figure when you compare it with other States. Only 3% of runners at the two city tracks in Melbourne used the Healesville straight track in the previous 45 days. In Sydney, just 6% of Wentworth Park runners had competed at either Appin or Wyong.

Capalaba's value is obvious. But it begs the question of why more dogs are not using the one-turn track at the Gold Coast (which often has vacancies) or the circle

at Ipswich.

Relatively, that is.

No doubt several factors come in to play but my first guess would be that too much SEQ racing is concentrated into a small part of the week. The Tuesday-Thursday period accounts for five of the seven TAB meetings each week, or six of nine if you count Lismore and Casino.

A Saturday run up Capalaba's straight obviously offers a better spread for some dogs preparing for weekday meetings at Albion Park. Maybe one of those Ipswich mid-week meetings would be better placed elsewhere.

BOGIE LEADS AGAIN

Harking back to last month's item on sectional times, how about Bogie Leigh's jaunt around The Meadows in the Australian Cup?

Anyone adding up the figures could have predicted that Bogie's first sectional performances would let it lead Been Cooler by one and a half lengths with Kilmany Assassin another head away. And that is precisely what happened. Good dogs can read the form guide, you know.

With a sub-30sec overall capability, Bogie Leigh was never going to lose the race. It bolted in by three lengths, giving another major victory to connections, and atoning for an unlucky third from its outside box in the Topgun when it couldn't quite cross Spring Secret.

That, too, was predictable as both Spring Secret (box 2) and Brumby Lad (3) were expected to come out at least as well as Bogie Leigh and therefore hold the early running.

Punters would have had plenty of confidence in those predictions because Bogie's sectional form is well disclosed - in Brisbane and interstate - and all bar one of the other Australian Cup runners came from Victoria where plenty of sectional data is available.

The remaining runner, Addis Boy, is notoriously unreliable at the start.

Bogie Leigh's average sectional prior to the big race was 5.10 (that includes outside times converted to Meadows' times). It actually ran 5.07.

JUST A THOUGHT

Three different people have said to me recently that greyhound racing has never been as clean as it is today. That's great, but shouldn't we be telling more people about it?

Not each other, but the public.

At the same time, you have to feel for those trainers now getting caught with a microscopic trace of a drug in their dog's system.

Given the huge variety of foodstuffs lying around the countryside - from poppy seeds to tea leaves thrown on the grass - it would seem reasonable to set a minimum level for prosecution purposes.