

To ignore amateur racing would be a strategic error for the future of the sport

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The decision to remove the 'classic' amateur status from the National Hunt Chase now, and from other amateur races tomorrow, seems a purely short-term approach to increase the number of runners from seven to (perhaps) nine or ten. In reality it sends a very poor message regarding the future of racing.

By concentrating solely on the narrow technical criteria of making the race more enticing to bet on, you are neglecting another fundamental consideration, namely the attractiveness of amateur races themselves, the image of racing and its promotion.

Racing works so hard to improve its image, and amateur sport, made up of nothing more than passion, commitment, competition and fair play, has so many values on display that show racing in a positive light, through people who risk themselves for nothing more than a love of the horse and of competition and with no financial reward.

And what of the role of amateurism in sport more generally? Imagine football or rugby without their amateur branches. It is often said that, when the amateur ranks suffer, it is bad news for an entire sport.

In addition, by ignoring the amateur branch of racing, you are closing a window to our sport. Amateur riders are your connection to the 'outside world'. In France they are dentists, shopkeepers, journalists, teachers, firemen and bankers; so many are in walks of life which are connected to wider civil society, the 'general public' which the marketing teams in racing the world over find so hard to reach and recruit.

There is no need for a marketing and promotional budgets here, these links are a gift!

Amateur races don't always produce the highest level of betting turnover, but they are a fantastic tool for promotion. So by supporting amateurism, not only are you investing in it, you are ensuring that when people talk of racing, they are talking of sport. And you will see that amateurism provides the best possible return on your investment, since it is self-evidently free.

Aside from the positive image that amateurism can offer to the wider world outside our racing bubble, don't forget what it can offer when you look inwards as well; the fantastic contribution of so many riders who, once they hang up their saddle, provide an essential source to nourish the professional game as trainers, owners, agents, stewards, racecourse committee members and volunteers, etc.

In listening to the debate around the changes being made to the National Hunt Chase, we seem to be lost between those who blame the amateur branch of racing as not being professional enough and those who say it has become too professional. It is perhaps an opportunity for Anglo-Irish amateurism to rethink its own model and clarify its ambitions.