

EDITORIAL

Instead of the usual Christ-man cheer that would appear in any number of magazine articles at this time of year, it is time for some very plain speaking. I hope that you read these few words, think on them and take heed.

Harness racing in Britain is always has been and always will be a minority sport. There are any number of reasons for that, but over something approaching 50 years a band of devoted people, starting with Lord Langford then Tom Menzies, Brian Peachey, Ken Lough and me have, leading from the front, tried to ensure that this little sport which offers so much but never quite gets there was and continues to be run to the best of our ability. We have always had help and without it we would have achieved nothing, from a band of people we collectively call Stewards. Today, across the three countries of England, Scotland & Wales there are about 30 people doing the work to put racing on and ensure it is run properly. None of those people is really paid, getting at best a contribution towards expenses and at worst nothing. In return they get unbridled criticism, unkind comments made about

them, insults hurled and threats made to the point that if something does not change they all might walk away and there are no people standing in the wings poised to take over.

Yippee you might say, but some of us can remember when there was no BHRC just a different set of Rules for each track or area of racing with a Rule Book often little more than a few lines of don't do this or that which applied to some and not to others. Is that what you want? Because a small minority of people appear to want that state of affairs to come about again.

At the AGM on 1st December there were very few happy faces and that was a day a lot of us never want nor will put up with again. I have given up hoping that the various factions in the sport can ever work together. Good god if we did instead of trading gossip, tittle tattle and awkwardness we might just improve. That unwieldy document, the Constitution, which is very difficult to understand but has never really got in our way for many years is being quoted left right and centre. It needs alteration and I will explain what I am going to recommend shortly. However let us be very clear,

the chairman is not the BHRC, nor the BHRC he. I try my best to chair meetings, keep them orderly and ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak. I also, acting on legal advice prosecute cases for the BHRC. I do a lot of work both nationally and internationally on drug testing as well as working with the office on any number of day to day issues. I take no pay, I hand back the Honorarium (a sum to cover lost expenses only). I might advise both the Committee and the Council but I do not dictate to them and often my advice is not taken. The Council of Stewards are the Directors of the company, they are not a "clique" or closed shop and their number has been known to increase or decrease slightly over the years as a result of resignations and new recruits. Then come the three Regional stewards (one for each country) who do any number of things from driving start cars to stopping fights but principally carrying out sampling for dope tests as well as advising track stewards and licence holders. Regional Stewards are initially appointed by the full Committee/Council together. Stewards have in the past been nominated by a Council Member but generally seconded by a Club or Association. In the past following the running of an election, unsuccessful candidates have occasionally

been invited to be Stewards if they received a substantial number of votes, Huw Evans and Barry Gray being appointed this way. All very straight forward it would appear, but not this year.

The 2013 season for falling out kicked off with two Stewards being up for rotation (Stella Havard and Barry Delaney) and following John Wright's resignation a vacant post. Initially there was one other candidate, Bret Strickland added to later by the proposal of Jim McNally and Craig Stevenson. At the committee meeting in November there was a move to appoint all the candidates without an election. Following a debate and a vote it was decided to have an election at the AGM. At the AGM there was more debate, some of it heated and on my suggestion and following a vote it was decided to run the election for the first three places and then run a second election for the remaining two. First past the post were Stella, Barry and Bret. To try and placate the situation I suggested that the full Committee vote on the issue of whether Jim and Craig should be elected. Not and either/or but a straight vote on whether you the voting member wanted Craig and/or Jim on the Council. My view was that should any of the candidates get 50% or more of

the 24 votes then the majority view of the BHRC was that the relevant person should go onto the Council. If they got less than 12 votes (50%) they should not go on. A fair simple suggestion I think. That pleased a lot of people but not everyone. I acted in what I believe was a fair basis. One candidate was elected by an overwhelming majority, votes for the other fell short.

Then came the Chairman's election and the issue was raised as to whether the incumbent Chairman had a vote. He always has had a vote in the past and I believe that cumbersome document the Constitution supports that situation. So an election was run and I got in with a small majority. John Menzies acquitted himself very well as I knew he would. However these two elections were not pretty affairs and we have to change, so here are my proposals which owe a fair bit in part to Watson Harrop Jnr.

The Constitution needs changing, not a rewrite, keep the best (simple) bits but re-draft the complicated unhelpful ones.

1) The Council is the Board of Directors for the Limited company which is the BHRC. I would suggest not less than 6 members and no more than 12. Appointed by election with proposal by a current board member and seconding by

a Club/Association. Within that number ideally one should be a Finance director and one specialise in HR (to oversee the office), one to specialise in Promotion and one for Drug Testing. They should within their number elect a Chief Steward. All Council members should as now offer themselves for re-election/appointment every three years.

2) There should be three (Stipendary) Regional Stewards as now who sit on the Council but not be Directors of the Company. A Stipendary Steward can be recruited for limited period to do a particular job but does not sit in Council and at the end of the tour of duty leaves the BHRC.

There can be any number of Deputy Regional Stewards but they have no rights to sit on the Council. 3) The chairman should be elected each year by a vote from Licence holders. To qualify for a vote a Licence Holder must have held a licence for three years, have no fines or dues outstanding of more than £50, have never had a horse in his training that has tested positive for a drug carrying A Class or B Class penalty and be a resident of England, Scotland or Wales. More over the Chairman should come from Scotland one year, Wales the next and then England, and so on.

I believe the above suggestions to be in the best long term interests of the sport and combine the political appointment of a Chairman, who will hopefully lead from the front, each year bring fresh ideas as well as a reinvigorated drive and determination to the job, with the stability of a settled Council/Board of Directors. Hopefully no future Chairman would have to put up with some of the stuff my predecessors and I have had to deal with. If this or some other solution is resolved I trust it will allow us to get on with the job. In the meantime we will be working to make the Delaney/Garnett/McInally conditioned race system happen, try to develop a secure effective Promotional programme, develop the office to be able to take entries and do race cards to a very high standard for all tracks who want them and govern the sport. But this is no idle threat, if the way Stewards ranging from the guy who helps on the gate to Council members and above are not treated better, with the respect they deserve you will be doing the job yourselves, and that might look like road racing round a track. Is that what you want? If the winds of change are blowing through our sport, fine but that change needs to be evolution not revolution.

Gordon Garnett