

What has happened to all the NH horses?

Asks Victor Sheahan after his research shows that runs per horse per season has been diminishing over the past 12 years

NORMALLY SIGH when I hear older racing folk talk about the good old days. If you were to believe them, horses were tougher, jockeys were tougher, the sport had more characters and everything was somehow better.

But to my surprise when I did a comparative study on the leading NH sires' table over the past 20 years, it seems the traditionalists are almost certainly right when it comes to the assertion that horses were sounder in the past.

Methodology

I looked at the *Racing Post* tables of the 50 leading sires by prize-money earnings in Britain and Ireland in the years since the newspaper's records began.

I then aggregated the number of runners, winners, runs and wins for these top 50 sires and calculated the average number of runs per runner in a season and the average number of wins per winner.

The results can be seen in the table below.

Summary of Findings

1. The average number of runs per horse per season is in freefall, dropping from over four per season to its current mark of 3.66. This is the major cause of concern arising from this research as it seems to indicate that our current NH horses are much less robust than their equivalents from only 20 years ago.

2. The jumping horses who do win, win far fewer races per season than in the past. The average number of wins has fallen from

1.78 wins per season to 1.48 per season, a 17 per cent reduction. This may simply be a logical follow-on from the fact that all horses (winners and non-winners) are running much less often.

3. The impact of bigger book sizes is very apparent. The number of combined runners in a season for the top 50 sires went from 2,207 (an average of 42 runners per stallion) to 5,347 (average of 107 runners per stallion), a 142 per cent increase in 21 years.

Possible reasons for decline

1. The question that arises is whether the reduced run frequency is a deliberate policy by trainers adopting a more protective and selective approach to racing their charges, or an indication that their charges cannot handle

NH Runs per horse in Britain and Ireland through each season from 1989

(using *Racing Post* stallion statistics for top 50 sires)

| Season | Rnrs | Wnrs | Runs | Wins | Av runs / horse | Av wins / wnr | Wnrs to rnrs % |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
| 2010-11 | 5,347 | 1,434 | 19,585 | 2,121 | 3.66 | 1.48 | 27 |
| 2009-10 | 5,347 | 1,419 | 19,802 | 2,126 | 3.70 | 1.50 | 27 |
| 2005-06 | 4,962 | 1,199 | 18,849 | 1,769 | 3.80 | 1.48 | 24 |
| 2004-05 | 4,194 | 1,136 | 15,975 | 1,742 | 3.81 | 1.53 | 27 |
| 2000-01* | 3,912 | 923 | 13,574 | 1,402 | 3.47 | 1.52 | 24 |
| 1999-00 | 3,616 | 963 | 14,105 | 1,522 | 3.90 | 1.58 | 27 |
| 1995-96 | 3,294 | 939 | 12,943 | 1,583 | 3.93 | 1.69 | 29 |
| 1994-95 | 3,190 | 895 | 13,015 | 1,536 | 4.08 | 1.72 | 28 |
| 1990-91 | 2,438 | 751 | 10,362 | 1,313 | 4.25 | 1.75 | 31 |
| 1989-90 | 2,207 | 649 | 9,137 | 1,158 | 4.14 | 1.78 | 29 |

a more regular racing regime?

It's difficult to be definitive, but it is reasonable to assume that owners prefer to have their horses competing, if those horses are fit, well and capable of winning.

As a trainer's primary concern is to keep his owners content, I can see no reason why they would deliberately pursue a policy of fewer runs, apart from special cases where a horse's handicap mark is being protected or campaigns are all about one race (e.g. Best Mate's campaign and the Gold Cup).

2. Are trainers responsible for the decline? Perhaps increased string sizes with less individual attention to horses, coupled with altered training techniques such as interval training and all-weather gallops have caused an increase in injury rates?

I don't believe it to be the case as horses are fitter today than 20 years ago – fitness is a hugely contributory factor in injury rates caused when racing – while improved veterinary techniques should also see faster rehabilitation from injuries.

However, in the absence of statistical data we have to consider the possibility.

3. Blame the stallions and the bigger books.

It's easy to conclude that because stallion books are bigger and horses are running less often there is a "cause and effect" situation.

I don't subscribe to that theory. If we take an example based on a book of say 80 mares being "acceptable" and anything more than that being "excessive" it is easy to see logical difficulties in this approach.

I fail to see how by virtue of covering a single mare beyond the magic number (80 in this case) that the quality of all the offspring could be affected, as this would require the genes of the foals in the already pregnant mares to somehow be altered by a subsequent event!

More credibly it could be argued that bigger books mean that less thought was given to compatibility with the mare, but this is a subjective area and unless there is an obvious conformation issue on both sides it may not be quite so easy to prove a stallion selection was unwise.

3b. It's not the bigger books – it is the bigger books being used on the wrong stallions. There is perhaps some merit in this argument. We have seen many examples of unproven new NH stallions attracting massive books of mares.

If these stallions prove to be progenitors of unsound offspring then there will be an awful



Over three seasons, Desert Orchid ran in 23 races, an average of 7.6 times a season, far in excess of most leading horses today. Is it trainers, race conditions, soundness issues or stallions that are causing this?

lot of fragile offspring on the ground.

Against that, the trend for bigger books has been of even greater benefit to the successful and proven stallions, who it should be hoped will therefore have an opportunity to transfer their positive attributes to even greater numbers.

4. It's something else entirely... The decline in average number of starts is not exclusive to jumps racing – research on the number of lifetime starts in the US lifetime show that outings per horse in the country has almost halved since the 1950s.

Unsound stallions who required medication to race is often put forward as a major cause and the internationalisation of bloodstock means that those bloodlines are prevalent here also.

It is also possible that the modern thoroughbred has passed a tipping point in terms of soundness; it is after all a closed stud book and with every generation the level of

inbreeding is increasing.

NH racing may just be another example of this and something more radical than tinkering with book sizes or alternative stallion selection will be required to make an appreciable difference to this trend.

Conclusion

We often don't notice change when it occurs quite gradually. Looking in the mirror each morning the overnight ageing process is imperceptible, but looking back on old photographs the transformations become obvious.

Something similar is happening before our eyes in NH racing. Horses are racing and winning less often each season and the cumulative effect is now quite striking. This should be a matter of concern to all lovers of the sport and at the very least further and in-depth research into the underlying causes is required. ■