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Kevin Blake

Our columnist uses prize-money stats to illustrate just how top-heavy Irish jumps racing has become and argues that now is the time to act before it is too late.

Thursday 10 December 2020 Blog

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The growth of the super-trainer in Irish National Hunt racing

In recent weeks, this column has sought to shine a light on the serious problems that have been allowed to develop in National Hunt racing in Britain and Ireland over the last two decades.

Two of the main causes of these issues that have been focused on are the substantial inflation of the Graded race programme and the ever-growing proportion of the best horses being controlled by a small number of powerful hands. The consequences of these two factors are particularly stark in Ireland and how the sport has changed there in the last 20 years will be the focus this week.

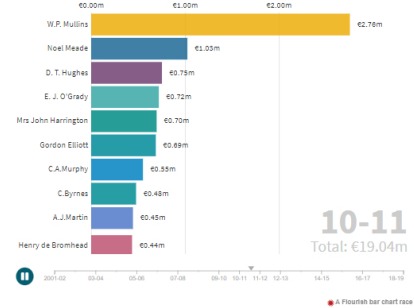
The growth in the number of Graded races in Ireland has been relentless. Despite the number of National Hunt runners in Ireland being almost half that of Britain, Ireland has more non-handicap Graded races in their calendar than Britain. Read that again and let it sink in.

The vast proliferation of Graded races in Ireland has coincided with the emergence of two dominant training forces in the sport in Willie Mullins and Gordon Elliott. The increasingly top-heavy programme book has served to accelerate the creation of a vast gap between the biggest trainers in the country and the rest.

This is illustrated to a shocking extent in this dynamic graph which illustrates how top heavy Irish National Hunt racing has become. It charts the progress of the top 10 trainers based on prize money each season from 2001/2 up to the most recent full National Hunt campaign in 2018/19 (the latest season being omitted due to the cancellation of valuable festivals at Fairyhouse and Punchestown in the Spring).

Top National Hunt trainers in Ireland

By prize money won (2001-2019)

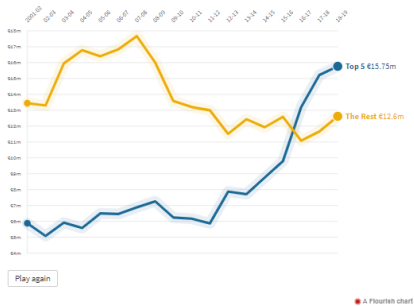


The sheer extent to which Willie Mullins and Gordon Elliott have come to dominate the sport is eye-opening when expressed in this style. What is also stark is how the number of individual trainers earning at least €500,000 in prize money in a season has reduced from a high of 13 in 2004/5 and 2007/8 to just six from the 2016/17 season onwards. This is despite total prize money levels having grown by almost 50% in that time. Read that again and let it sink in.

To further illustrate just how much the gap between the top trainers and the rest has widened in the last 20 years, the dynamic chart below divides the prize money earned by the top 100 National Hunt trainers in Ireland each season into two groups, the top five and the rest. The change over time has been quite extraordinary.

Top 5 National Hunt trainers vs the Rest in Ireland

By prize money won (2001-2019)



It goes without saying that these graphs undoubtedly reflect the brilliance of the Willie Mullins and Gordon Elliott teams. They don't owe an apology to anyone for scaling their businesses to the extent that they have and raising the bar of achievement to previously unheard-of levels.

However, the way the National Hunt race programme in Ireland has changed in the last 20 years has undoubtedly favoured those with the horse power to compete in Graded races. Mullins and Elliott have ruthlessly capitalised on these changes and those that cannot compete at those levels have been fighting for what has become a progressively smaller piece of the prize money pie. It has never been more difficult for a trainer or owner with relatively limited resources to make an impact and that has served to and will continue to accelerate the reduction in variety of the sport.

The result of all this is that in terms of character the sport has changed beyond recognition. For decades Flat racing was considered a business dominated by a select few powerful operations while the National Hunt game was much more of the racing code of the ordinary man.

Danoh Doran's Pride Brave Inca, all legendary horses owned and trained by people that could have been anyone. The dream seemed achievable. All that has changed now, National Hunt racing has become dominated by a small number of powerful players who have been aided and abetted by a race programme that has evolved to favour them at the expense of less powerful trainers and owners. The top of National Hunt racing has never been less reachable and the game has suffered for it.

Ultimately, National Hunt racing has to ask what it wants for itself. It goes without saying that we all love the sport, but this love seems to blind many from seeing just how far it has fallen as a consistently competitive and engaging spectacle.

The top end of the sport has become saturated with small-field, uncompetitive Graded races. Once proud and prestigious races have become diminished to the status of glorified Cheltenham Festival trials. Yet, despite spending the whole season building to the Cheltenham Festival, that meeting has become so bloated that it now regularly fails to deliver the dashes that National Hunt followers spend all season yearning to see. The sport now primarily involves the same faces winning races with odds-on shots over and over again. It is hardly riveting and engaging to those that already love the sport, so how can we expect it to attract the next generation of followers?

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Compulsive viewing? Chacun Pour Soi - a 1/5 shot - wins the four-runner Hilly Way Chase at Cork.

We as a sport have the ability to change all of this. The potential solutions have been put forward in more detail in this space on a number of occasions in recent years, but in a nutshell, the number of Grade 1 races needs to be slashed, the lesser Graded races have to be converted into handicaps and the programme of the Cheltenham Festival has to be reduced significantly. The aim will be to funnel the best horses in training either into races against each other at level weights or to take on lesser horses on fair terms in handicaps, providing much more engaging and meaningful races on a regular basis, and the Cheltenham Festival can once again become a proper Championship for our sport.

An increase in high-end handicaps will also serve to give connections of mid-range horses a chance to run in valuable races more often without fear of incurring an increased handicap mark for little gain. One only has to look at the example of Martindale incurring an 11lb rise for finishing third in a slowly-run renewal of the Clarence House Chase at Ascot earlier this year to see why connections of lower-rated horses are so reluctant to run them in level-weights Graded races, which is a big factor in those races routinely attracting small fields.

As drastic as such changes may seem, they are unlikely to fundamentally change the pecking order in the sport, with Mullins, Elliott, Henderson and Nicholls still all-out certain to lead the way. What it will do is rebalance the opportunities amongst all trainers, jockeys and owners to earn a bigger slice of the prize money pie. This can only serve to make National Hunt racing more viable and attractive to participants of all sizes, as well as producing much more engaging races for the racing public to enjoy.

Make no mistake, tougher days are coming. Racecourses are facing severe threats to their viability. The biggest threat of all may come in the form of the move of wider society against betting, most imminently in the shape of the Gambling Act review in the UK, which poses a huge threat to the finances of horse racing. We as a sport cannot afford to sleepwalk into a crisis and should be doing everything we can to make our racing product as attractive as possible to as big an audience as possible.


Right now, National Hunt racing is only delivering a fraction of the potential it has to produce competitive and engaging action throughout the season. Will those with the power to make changes be brave enough to take action and tackle the monster that the Graded race programme has become? For the greater good of the sport, I sincerely hope that they do.

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In a changing world where information and data remain key, Kevin calls for the physical data of racehorses to become fact - not opinion.

Money 18 January 2021 | Blog

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When it comes to thoroughbred horses, does size matter?

When it comes to size in thoroughbred horses, the waters are muddy. Be it on the sales grounds or the racecourse, whether a horse is 'big enough' remains a common question to hear asked. But just what is 'big enough'? What is an average height for a sprinter or a middle-distance horse? Unfortunately, due to a lack of published data of the height of racehorses, the subject is one driven by subjective opinion, anecdotal evidence and received wisdom.

The game is littered with sayings such as "A good big one will always beat a good small one" and "Big horses, big problems". One of my personal favourites is one often attributed to Phoshe O'Brien which goes something like, "if size had anything to do with speed, a cow would outrun a rabbit".

However, we will not be entirely confined to anecdotal evidence any longer, as I have found a means to conduct a statistical analysis on a large sample of the heights of elite racehorses.

Every year Weatherbys produce an excellent publication called the Stallion Book, along with an accompanying Global Stallions app that is a treasure trove of information for breeders all over the world. It comes detailed info and photographs of almost 300 stallions. One piece of information that they collect from the stallion farms and publish is the height of the stallions. Weatherbys have kindly supplied me with this information in bulk and this data can be used to answer many interesting questions regarding the heights of a large sample of the very best horses that the breed has produced during the last couple of decades.

The 2021 Stallion Book Package

WEATHERBYS

The No.1 global stallion guide

This collated data reveals that from the 152nd Godvill in Ireland up to the 1634th Krasan Black in Japan, the average mature height of the 274 flat stallions that have one listed in the Stallion Book 2021 is just over 16 hands. To be exact, 16.01's hands or 1.64 meters.

While it is difficult to put a number of what the general expectation of this average would be amongst racing and bloodstock professionals, I dare suggest that more than most would have expected the average height of elite colts to be taller than barely over 16hh.

Fascinatingly, when these stallions are divided into separate categories based on their maximum winning distance range (5-7f, 7.5f-10f and 10.5f+), the average height in these groups shows no variation of note from the overall average. That is likely to come as another surprise to many. It illustrates that when it comes to height at least, there isn't a trip-related trend amongst elite thoroughbreds.

Of course, it would be even more fascinating to expand this breed of analysis if the racing weights of these stallions were available. Amongst other things, it would allow the extent of the common perception of the more heavily-muscled sprinting type and the leaner middle-distance performer to be statistically tested.

The above analysis represents just a couple of simple examples of the sort of research and content that can be driven by data such as this, but such work is only possible if the data is recorded and made available.

Fresh data can attract younger generation to racing

On that subject, I wrote an article back in 2019 that is worth revisiting in this context which made a detailed case for heights and weights of racehorses to be officially recorded when they arrive at the track to run.

As is often the case when such suggestions are made, it received a mixed reception. Inevitably, a few poured cold water on the proposal, with some of the objections being rooted in concerns about costs and practicalities. More frustratingly, others were of the flavour of 'people wouldn't understand how to use such information if you give it to them' and 'it wouldn't help anyone back winners so it isn't worthwhile'. Essentially, they either didn't understand the ways that such data could be used to add colour to the picture and/or don't see the value in doing so.

Mercifully, an ever-growing proportion of racing's audience realise the potential that collecting such data can have for the quality of the coverage and depth of understanding of the sport. Younger generations in particular have a thirst for data-driven analysis based on tangible facts rather than 'feel' and 'experience' that older generations of analysts have leaned on for so long. Other sports have embraced these changing demands of their audience, with coverage of almost every mainstream sport having placed a far greater emphasis on statistics and data in the last decade.

Despite horse racing having been decades ahead of other sports in terms of the depth of data and form-based information that we take as a given, it has been incredibly slow to embrace the greater thirst of their audience for even deeper statistics and information such as sectional times, declarations of breathing operation and in-foul mares, horse weights and heights. Remarkably, it has even been a struggle to get the authorities to realise the importance of why fundamental details such as race distances need to be as accurate as possible. This resistance has seen racing go from enjoying a clear lead amongst data-driven sports to now lagging behind others that have answered the call for more data with much more enthusiasm.

A changing world with an appetite for more information

However, the world has changed rapidly during the 15 months since that article was published. The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the world's adaption to demands for more detailed remote-friendly information out of necessity. This is particularly true in the bloodstock sector, as with access to sales grounds having been limited for much of the last year, vendors and sales companies have responded by offering buyers significantly more detailed footage of and information about their horses. For example, as well as detailed videos and photos now being almost standard, at the breeze-up sales last year it became common for vendors to list the height and weight of their horses on the sales website as they felt the buyers would value that information.

When making the case for the publishing of weights and heights of racehorses, it is important to emphasise the wide variety of uses that such data has. There is often an assumption that calls for such data are rooted in a desire to use it to ascertain fitness levels in horses for betting purposes. While some will inevitably look to use them as a guide on that front, those with experience of having access to such data know it is a far from exact science. Publishing weights and heights to give the racing public a wider understanding of this science, but the potential benefits of this data extend far beyond those with betting motivations.

At a basic level, it would allow us to establish what the average size/weight really is for horses of various types. We would no longer rely on pundits relaying their guesstimates of a horse's size to the viewers, as the data would tell us exactly how each horse compares to the average horse of their type. We would know who the smallest, tallest, heaviest and lightest horses are. The potential for information like this to drive informed narrative should be obvious.

Beyond the basics, such data has the potential to be used for high-end analysis too. To give one example, striding data has grown significantly in popularity in recent years. This brand of analysis could potentially be notably more informed by an addition of height data into calculations. For instance, a horse with a stride length that is just above the average might just be considered of marginal interest based on that information alone. However, that assessment would be turned on its head if published heights revealed that the same horse was in the bottom 5% of the horse population in terms of height, making that above-average stride much more impressive than the stride length in isolation.

Those with a thirst for data can only hope that the racing authorities see the endless potential for improvement in the coverage and understanding of thoroughbreds that the collection of detailed physical data of racehorses could stimulate. All they have to do is put the systems in place to collect high-quality data - the analysts, both professional and amateur, will do the work after that. The possibilities are endless.

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Kevin Blake

Kevin studies the numbers and discovers some alarming issues regarding the quality of National Hunt racing, including the effects of an inflated graded race programme.

Wednesday 25 November 2020 Blog

Alarming statistics highlight major issues in National Hunt racing

Wonderful news! The quality of National Hunt horse in Great Britain and Ireland has never been higher. This is vividly illustrated by these remarkable statistics detailing how the number of horses rated 140 or higher over hurdles and fences in Britain and Ireland has grown to an incredible extent during the last 15 years.

Chasers Rated 140+ in Britain and Ireland

Season	Total (Novices)	Britain - Total (Novices)	Ireland - Total (Novices)	Rated 170+	% of 140+ horses rated 170+	3-year rolling average
2005/6	181 (88)	104 (88)	47 (17)	4	2.6%	-
2006/7	178 (82)	125 (40)	47 (12)	5	2.9%	-
2007/8	184 (48)	120 (27)	61 (14)	10	8.4%	8.6%
2008/9	214 (76)	148 (54)	68 (19)	7	3.3%	5.9%
2009/10	281 (82)	148 (48)	83 (36)	6	2.6%	5.8%
2010/11	230 (73)	184 (81)	78 (22)	9	3.9%	3.5%
2011/12	240 (79)	169 (82)	78 (27)	6	2.9%	3.0%
2012/13	220 (85)	147 (81)	73 (34)	10	4.9%	3.7%
2013/14	287 (108)	196 (86)	91 (39)	8	1.0%	2.7%
2014/15	292 (100)	198 (88)	94 (34)	7	2.4%	2.7%
2015/16	307 (109)	197 (88)	109 (41)	7	2.9%	1.9%
2016/17	310 (137)	206 (72)	103 (85)	4	1.9%	2.0%
2017/18	318 (116)	195 (70)	118 (45)	4	1.9%	1.6%
2018/19	325 (118)	212 (89)	112 (45)	9	2.8%	1.8%
2019/20	348 (126)	222 (75)	121 (81)	9	2.6%	2.2%

Hurdles Rated 140+ in Britain and Ireland

Season	Total (Novices)	Britain - Total (Novices)	Ireland - Total (Novices)	Rated 170+	% of 140+ horses rated 170+	3-year rolling average
2005/6	112 (35)	78 (25)	39 (10)	0	0.0%	-
2006/7	123 (42)	72 (28)	45 (9)	1	0.8%	-
2007/8	182 (81)	82 (32)	46 (19)	2	1.5%	0.8%
2008/9	174 (88)	114 (48)	59 (21)	3	1.7%	1.4%
2009/10	186 (88)	104 (59)	82 (16)	2	1.5%	1.5%
2010/11	178 (87)	120 (88)	58 (19)	3	1.7%	1.6%
2011/12	178 (70)	107 (89)	71 (31)	3	1.7%	1.6%
2012/13	182 (71)	116 (41)	66 (30)	3	1.6%	1.7%
2013/14	208 (86)	132 (83)	76 (33)	0	0.0%	1.1%
2014/15	224 (94)	149 (84)	75 (30)	1	0.4%	0.7%
2015/16	230 (76)	129 (32)	99 (43)	2	0.9%	0.4%
2016/17	236 (92)	181 (84)	84 (38)	0	0.0%	0.4%
2017/18	219 (87)	128 (48)	90 (39)	0	0.0%	0.3%
2018/19	260 (88)	181 (44)	108 (48)	1	0.4%	0.1%
2019/20	284 (101)	147 (37)	117 (80)	0	0.0%	0.1%

Remarkable, isn't it?

What makes these numbers look even more extraordinary is that they came during a 15-year period that saw a substantial reduction in the number of runners in National Hunt races both in Britain and Ireland, as shown by these statistics:

	Great Britain		Ireland	
Year	NH Races	NH Runners	NH Races	NH Runners
2006	3380	35368	1394	20119
2019	3719	31423	1424	16467

Unfortunately, these numbers aren't remarkable for the reasons that those of a blindly positive disposition might first think.

Rather than being indicative of this being a golden age for National Hunt racing in this part of the world, these statistics represent just one of the unintended consequences of race programming that has diluted and diminished the quality of National Hunt racing as a spectacle, and facilitated the continued growth of dominant trainers at the top of the sport.

As can be seen in the first table, despite a significant reduction in runner numbers during the same time frame, there was an incredible increase in the number of horses rated 140 or higher both over hurdles and fences in both Britain and Ireland. The number of chasers with such a rating increased from 151 in 2005/6 to 343 in 2019/20 - an increase of 127.2%. The number of such hurdlers increased from 112 to 262 in the same time - an increase of 135.7%.

Yet, the data also shows that in the same time period, the percentage of horses rated 140+ over hurdles and fences that got to a rating 170 or higher reduced significantly. This was particularly pronounced over hurdles, with just one hurdler rated 170 or higher since the start of the 2016/17 campaign. This contrasts with a decade ago when it was typical for two or three horses to reach such heights each season.

So, are we really to believe that the volume of horses rated 140 to 169 has more than doubled in the last 15 years, yet the number of 170+ chasers have remained largely static, and the number of 170+ hurdlers has significantly reduced? It doesn't seem to make much sense.

One common assumption is that the apparent influx of French-bred National Hunt horses in the last 15 years is likely to be contributed to the vast increase in horses rated 140+ in Britain and Ireland. However, this theory doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Country of Origin of 140+ Performers in Britain and Ireland						
Country Bred In	Total 140+ 2006/7	Total 140+ 2018/19	Chasers 140+ 2006/7	Chasers 140+ 2018/19	Hurdles 140+ 2006/7	Hurdles 140+ 2018/19
Ireland	149 (50.3%)	307 (52.5%)	86 (49.7%)	192 (64%)	63 (51.7%)	175 (48.1%)
France	84 (28.4%)	183 (31.3%)	55 (31.8%)	103 (31.7%)	29 (23.6%)	80 (20.8%)
Britain	47 (16.9%)	88 (15%)	27 (15.6%)	38 (11.7%)	20 (16.3%)	50 (13.2%)
Germany	12 (4.4%)	9 (0.8%)	4 (2.4%)	1 (0.3%)	4 (4.9%)	4 (1.1%)
Other	6 (2%)	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.3%)	5 (4.1%)	1 (0.4%)
	296	585	173	325	123	260

As can be seen, while there have been some changes in the distribution of the origin of 140+ horses in Britain and Ireland, with the Irish-bred proportion of chasers and the French-bred proportion of hurdlers both increasing, the overall proportions of the origins of 140+ horses has stayed much the same over this time period.

When I first highlighted these strange statistics almost five years ago, the handicappers on either side of the Irish Sea were not able to provide a convincing explanation. I would welcome their views, as it really is a puzzle.

While we wait for an official response, I'll put forward a theory. Considering the number of National Hunt runners have fallen significantly in the last 15 years, it is notable just how much the number of Graded races increased on both sides of the Irish Sea during the same time period.

Graded Races in Ireland			
	2006	2019	% increase
Grade 1	28	97	53.1%
Grade 2	29	80	8.4%
Grade 3	28	97	53.1%
Total	85	104	22.4%

Graded Races in Britain			
	2006	2019	% increase
Grade 1	28	40	42.9%
Grade 2 (non-national)	49	61	24.5%
Total	77	101	31.2%

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The vast increase in the number of Graded races at the same time that runner numbers have reduced, coupled with the concentration of a greater proportion of high-quality horses in a smaller number of powerful yards, has created a very unhealthy situation in National Hunt racing.

It has never been easier for trainers to pick and choose Graded race options for their horses, ducking and diving to avoid highly-rated rivals and stabilimeters in an entirely understandable effort to maximise their vast array of equine riches. The main consequence of this process is a proliferation of small-field, uncompetitive Graded races on both sides of the Irish Sea. Indeed, last weekend alone saw five Grade 2 contests take place, only one of which had a field bigger than four runners. The exception had seven runners. How anyone bar those with runners in these races could consider that a satisfactory situation at what is the very top end of our sport is beyond me. There simply aren't enough high-quality horses in differing hands to come close to adequately filling up the vast array of Graded races in the National Hunt calendar.

Quality races need to hit the "Grade"

For Graded races to maintain their status, the three-year average race rating (the average of the official ratings of the best four horses to start in the race in any given year) has to stay above a set parameter for that Grade. It seems the official handicappers are often inclined to rate these Graded races at a level expected by that grade, rather than handicapping the races on their individual and often below-standard merits. This would go a long way to explaining the vast inflation of the number of horses rated 140 and higher in line with the significant increase in Graded races, whilst the number of horses rated 170 or higher has stayed static or reduced.

Of course, the consequences of an inflated Graded race programme are far more significant than handicap marks being thrown out of skew. The day-to-day spectacle of National Hunt racing has suffered as calculated, risk-averse campaigning of the best and most promising horses in training has become commonplace. With so many of the best horses now being in a much smaller number of hands, it has allowed the biggest trainers to exploit the bloated programme book, making it much more difficult for trainers with less fire power to compete.

Even the Cheltenham Festival, billed as the Olympics of our sport, has become a victim of the inflation of its programme, regularly failing to deliver the clashes that the sport craves all season. This dilution continues to this day, with the inclusion of a mares' chase to this season's Cheltenham Festival adding yet another superfluous race to the meeting that will only serve to subtract rather than add to the spectacle.

Potential solutions to these ongoing issue have been put forward in this space for many years and were reiterated as recently as [last month](#). The main proposals are a ruthless reduction in the number of Grade 1 races and a conversion of all Grade 2 and Grade 3 races into handicaps. Many will undoubtedly see those proposals as being too drastic, but the situation has been allowed to worsen for so long that it will take a drastic adjustment to make a meaningful difference.

National Hunt racing still has all the assets to consistently deliver great sporting spectacles, but right now the bloated programme of Graded races is falling the sport, the vast majority of its participants and all of its followers. The key question is whether anyone with the power to make the necessary changes will be brave and bold enough to defy the wishes of the biggest players in the sport and make the drastic changes that are so clearly needed.



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