



NATIONAL HANDICAPPING REFORM - REVIEW

A national conference of the Harness Racing Australia Integrity Rules & Handicapping Committee in July 2008 recommended a number of amendments to the national Handicapping Rules. The Committee radically revised the handicapping system to shape a new, streamlined and simplified system that has the flexibility to meet the needs of all States and is much more user-friendly for owners, trainers and punters.

The recommended changes to the Handicapping rules are seen by IR&H Committee members as a “watershed moment” in Australian harness racing.

A number of issues with the current rules were identified -

- A lack of flexibility which hinders states from utilizing their available racing resources to best advantage.
- Have not evolved to meet the present-day needs of the States which have a wide range of differing economic circumstances and prizemoney levels.
- Hinder the manufacture of appealing wagering product by overly limiting eligibility. This situation is exacerbated in areas where racing stocks are smallest and/or there are limited numbers in various assessment classifications.
- Obstruct racing longevity and inhibits the retention of mares and fillies in the system.
- Are complicated and not easily understood by users, particularly punters.

The recommended changes are summarized as follows –

Two year olds will be isolated from the general racing population. The current formal classification scales will be discontinued and races will be programmed using specified conditions such as wins, stake-earnings, etc. (e.g. replaces 2A0, 2MA1, etc). There will be no carryover of penalties from 2yo performances into subsequent seasons.

All other horses will comprise the general racing population. Central to the grading of horses will be a career scale (derived from the current ‘country’ scale) commencing at C0 and progressing in single increments in adherence to the philosophy of ‘one win, one penalty’.

The automatic fixed link which now equates a C5 horse to M0 will be discontinued and a floating link substituted until a horse wins its first open-age metropolitan race. When a horse wins its first ‘M’ race the link is then fixed.

For example, if a C2 horse wins an M0 race it will become C3/M1 and the link is fixed. Thereafter, for a win in a ‘C’ race, it will incur one ‘C’ penalty for each win or, for a win in an ‘M’ race, one ‘M’ penalty plus

one 'C' penalty. If the horse then won another metro race it would C4/M2, or instead, if it then won two 'C' races it would be C5/M1.

Another example using a faster class horse is; if a C10 horse won an M0 it would become C11/M1 and if it then won an M1 race it would be C12/M2.

The 'career' class is the 'backbone' of the new system and using a logical progression up the scale of 'one win, one penalty', removes much of the complexity from the current system and facilitates more evenness in race fields.

Although the flexibility of the new system would support the examples above, it is likely that each State will introduce local policy to set the minimum 'C' class that a horse must attain to be eligible to contest an 'M' class race in the State.

Dropping back in class - In addressing the issue of longevity on the racetrack, the proposed system incorporates an automatic 'drop back' provision that will keep horses competitive for longer and enhance wagering product by grading horses on their ability at that time.

The 'drop back' provision is that the respective classifications of a horse – R, C and M, will automatically be reduced by one class immediately after a horse has 10 starts without winning a race. A horse cannot drop back further than R1, C1 and M1 as it is considered that the 'maiden' classes should be protected.

There is no time-frame associated with the drop-back provision and the number of starts being fixed at 10 is based on the average starts per year which varies between 9 and 11 across Australia.

Racing out of class - Another initiative to enhance racefields and which also addresses the issue of cost-pressures associated with travel is the introduction of a broad capacity within the rules for racing 'out of class'. Although the rule will be broad by design, the States' autonomy will be maintained by the ability of a State to set its own limits using local policy.

The new system will allow a horse to nominate for any race at or above its classification – subject to eligibility conditions and State policy. Whether or not the horse gains a start is not a matter for the rules but for the respective State's fields selection policies however if the horse wins the subject race it will only incur one penalty on its classification.

Three year olds - Included in the design of the new system is recognition that today's 3yo pacers have attained a level of maturity comparable to older horses. They are therefore included in the general racehorse population when they turn three.

The new system will allow unlimited wins as a 2yo therefore all 3yo's will be classified C0 at the start of the season irrespective of how many races are won as a 2yo.

There is no 3MA scale in the new system therefore the penalty for winning a metropolitan class race will be one career penalty. Any horse, 3yo's included, will not trigger an 'M' penalty until it wins an M0 race.

If a trainer/owner gets the long dreamed of 'champion', it will be advantaged by the new system. If the horse was to win a number of feature races – say a couple of Derbies, a Sires Stakes Final and a Breeders Crown, it would start its 4yo career as an M0 horse and not a FFA horse as is likely the case now. The “better than average” horse will also benefit most from racing 'out of class' as provided for in the new system.

On the other side of the ledger, the lesser 'performed/ordinary' older horses in most stables are looked after too. They will have more chances to win in the C0 and C1 class because they will not be competing against handy 3yo's that have already won career/country penalty races.

A 3yo will have the opportunity to win its share of graduation penalty races, subject to eligibility conditions, without affecting its earnings potential in career class races.

Throughout its whole career, a 3yo will benefit from the drop-back provisions. Further, the new system is consistent in its defence of C0's as they are also protected from drop-backs.

Conclusion - Present-day economic circumstances are difficult and to sustain prize money and real prospects for growth means the industry must better utilize its existing resources to stimulate higher wagering returns. The proposed changes to the rules address the core issues.

Review process – The Committee considered the prospects for successfully introducing the new grading system, together with on-going compliance, will be influenced by the industry's ability to review and modify the system as may be required. Therefore it is proposed that review of the rules by the Integrity, Rules and Handicapping Committee will be conducted each year.

Consultation process – This document is the first step in the consultation process and provides a summary of the HRA Integrity Rules & Handicapping Committee recommendations.

Forums - HRQ is to conduct public forums where the changes will be explained in detail.

The Forums will be conducted as follows:

Sunday 15 February 2009	Marburg	11.00am
Monday 16 February 2009	Gold Coast	7.00pm
Monday 23 February 2009	Redcliffe	7.00pm

For further information please contact the Racing Office on (07) 3262 7977.
