

## *From Nureyev to Dylan Thomas...*

### *Does international racing need one set of rules?*

BY GEIR STABELL / 2008



*Queen Anne Stakes 2006: Ad Valorem hampers Peeress (red) and Court Masterpiece close home. The Stewards at Royal Ascot let him keep the race, while both French and North American Stewards would have thrown him right out. © Stefano Grasso*

**Imagine this: The teams arrive for the World Cup finals. Players, managers and officials are called in for a meeting to clarify rules. This meeting takes a whole day. Why? Because so many rules differ in various jurisdictions.**

*In one country a striker is not ruled offside unless there is 'about two metres' of daylight between him and the last defender. In another, bringing down a rival player is not seen as a foul if the referee feels that 'the falling player was too tired, and would not have caught the ball anyway'. It is all a bit confusing and it will not be easy, in the heat of the moment, for players to adjust to rules differing from what they are used to.*

*Sounds unreal? You bet it does. It sounds almost as unreal as the situation regarding some of our current rules on horseracing.*

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Many racing professionals have been calling for one set of international rules for some time. Horseracing is in global focus and the need for harmonisation of the rules is more and more pressing. Not just for the sake of trainers, jockeys and racehorse owners. Nor just for the sake of horse racing's battle for a share of the gambling market, or for the sake of a fair and level playing field. In many cases, simply for the sake of common sense.

Horseracing is relying on betting and that marketplace is truly global these days. Betting on racing may not be increasing locally everywhere but in the USA 'simulcasting' has been growing steadily for the past twenty years, and it is now growing also in Europe. Last year betting on horseracing went up by six per cent globally. There is international competition for the betting pound, dollar and euro, much in the wake of more shipping of horses. Therefore, perhaps it is time to develop one set of rules.

Comments like "what is allowed here, definitely does not go there" are being made all the time in racing circles. If punters are frustrated, what then about trainers, who are making a living from the sport? Drawing up one set of European rules would be nothing but positive, for everyone involved. This may be a big task, not least since it will require time for meetings, conferences and, of course, some compromises here and there. There may be a will to achieve this but, unfortunately, when we talk about harmonising rules on racing, we come across an incredibly slow process. Some would say no process at all. Perhaps authorities should press for some quick changes.

#### **INTERFERENCE OR NO INTERFERENCE**

The main issue is that of interference in races. We have seen many cases over the years of decisions made by Stewards that would be reversed in a neighbouring country. The Stewards are not to blame. They are bound by their rules and guidelines but one must say that, if one group is in a strong position to recommend amendments to these guidelines, it must be the Stewards themselves. So long as they do not push for changes one must assume that they are happy with the rules as they are.

French trainer **Alain de Royer-Dupre** feels that "it is not the nature of the different rules that are the problem, it is knowing all the different rules, which is not so easy all the time". Royer-Dupre says that he would like to see professional Stewards, and he is also in favour of a unification of the rules across Europe, "but that would be expensive, and is probably not an easy change to implement", he says. "You have to accept the rules where you race. It is like going to Royal Ascot, you must wear a top hat, it is a funny thing but it is part of the game".

On which rules may need changing, Royer-Dupre says that "I agree that we should reduce the use of the whip. It is important that the races are seen as totally 'clean' by the public. Therefore I also believe that it is important that the jockeys ride all horses out, not give up when they are fifth or sixth close home. We need the betting money, and this is about the image of racing."

*Can any rules be dropped, or should some be changed dramatically?*

"Not in my opinion", Royer-Dupre says, "it is very strict here in France but I do not have a problem with it. Rules on tongue straps are different around Europe though, and that can cause headaches. In England you have to declare straps, in France you can run a horse with a tongue strap without declaring it. A tongue-strap is a small thing, I do not believe it needs to be declared. Rules on earplugs are also different and I would say that we should perhaps not allow them in races. The use of earplugs can affect the horse's reflexes, and make him unaware of other horses around him – therefore it can be dangerous."

## A MORE RELAXED VIEW

English trainer **Brian Meehan**, whose stable star Red Rocks beat Curlin in the Man O'War Stakes at Belmont in July, takes quite a relaxed view on differing rules and regulations;

"Every jurisdiction has its own set of rules and its own interpretations, but I do not see it as a problem", he says, "it can sometimes be a bit of a minefield to learn them but mostly you find the rules on websites, you need to study them and you have to play by the rules. If you don't like them you don't have to go. Regarding the way Stewards work, the main difference between North America and England is how quickly they work in the States. Very often over there you don't realise it's going on! There is always the possibility of an appeal of course, like we have over here. I think the Stewards are very good in England these days, with full time Stipendiary Stewards we pretty much have a set of professional Stewards in place and they are very thorough. Maybe it's a good thing that amateur Stewards are sitting in too, as that gives two different sets of opinions."

**Alastair Donald**, managing director of the International Racing Bureau in Newmarket, is a man with decades of experience in organising entries, trips and visits for overseas runners and their connections.

"We are recruiting runners for international races", he explains, "but with such different rules in each country we often have problems, simply caused by different rules. I do think that if there was more consistency over rules in Europe, and the USA, it would be very helpful. Take rules on interference, which vary even in England, Ireland and France. This year's Irish Derby may be a good case in point, and last year's Arc also springs to mind. Without going into these cases in detail, I would say that this is one area it would be desirable to address at the international racing conference in Paris the week after the Arc meeting."

## What about crossing the Atlantic, to race in the States?

"The prizemoney and the opportunities are excellent", Donald says, "but going there requires quite a bit of homework. Remember that rules and regulations are different from state to state. In some places one even requires fingerprints taken by the owner to be allowed to run. Though we are mainly talking about racing rules, regulations on what is allowed in the race itself, matters like these do come into play. Another aspect is that of which shoes are allowed. There is no standard rule for this across America."

*Surely, when travelling in Europe, one is on a more level playing field?*

"Yes, I guess you can say that", Donald reflects, "but one can get surprises. In Germany, if a horse is difficult to load and connections ask for it to go in last, the horse is automatically given the outside stall. In Italy, if a horse is a late scratch it triggers a ten-day ban, meaning that you cannot enter in Italy and, say France, the same weekend and run where the ground suits your horse. One can avoid the ban by paying a substantial fine, but this practice is still far removed from what English trainers are used to."

European runners in America outnumber Americans in Europe by hundreds to one, meaning that US trainers have even less experience draw on if they plan to send a horse to Royal Ascot, the Arc meeting or any other big event in our part of the world. A total ban on medication is easy to observe, but many trainers in the USA may overlook little things like the fact that over here a horse can not be backed into the stall – a solution frequently reverted to by stalls handlers in America.

The international racing world is expanding, and next month many horses will be sent out to Turkey, for their valuable international meeting. The races are open to foreign horses but geldings are barred. This is probably just one of a set on "new" rules our trainers will have to learn. "A few years ago, I was called into the Stewards in Turkey, as they had a problem with a horse running in a tongue tie, but had not been declared to run with one", Alastair Donald says, "the officials wanted to scratch the horse, or force the trainer to run him without the tongue tie. My view was that if the Stewards made the horse compete without a tongue-tie, they would in effect be defrauding the betting public, as the horse had always been racing with a tie at home. They accepted this and allowed him to run with the tie".

Correct, and meaningful, information in racecards and racing publications are absolutely vital to gain confidence among the betting public, but regulations on such information is also very different around the world. In some jurisdictions only changes in equipment needs to be informed, while in others a change like blinkers on / blinkers off cannot be made for a start following a win. When a change is made, it is printed clearly in the racecard. It may not be too relevant to European trainers, but this actually means that debutants run in blinkers in the USA, do so without any such information available to the public. Simply because no change has been made. In England, a debutant racing with blinkers is given as "first time blinkers" in the raceday publications, something that also seems rather bizarre, since the horse has never run before.

In Scandinavia, you need to declare it if the horse has been gelded since its last start, and the information is published along with all other raceday scratches and changes. And if you send a horse to run in Norway, don't forget to tell your jockey that there is a total ban on any use of the whip in that country. Riders are allowed to use it to slap the horse down the neck or shoulder but both hands must be on the reins at all times – unless the horse needs a correction to avoid interfering with others or causing a dangerous situation during the contest.

### **HISTORY TELLS AN INTERESTING TALE**

Interferences in races is not something that has been making the headlines just recently, it goes back much longer than to cases like Royal Gait in the 1988 Ascot Gold Cup and Aliysa in the 1989 Oaks. Remember Nureyev in the 2,000 Guineas at Newmarket back in 1980? He was an impressive winner but disqualified, having caused interference to Posse two furlongs from home. The interference was serious, nearly bringing Posse down, yet the latter recovered to finish third. Nureyev's disqualification was inevitable. The most interesting side to the case is this; Nureyev was the first horse to lose a 2,000 Guineas in the Stewards' room. He is still the only horse to have been disqualified from this classic, first run in 1809. Which indicates that historically it has taken quite a lot for a horse to be disqualified in principal races in England. Compared to other jurisdictions, that is certainly the case also today. Compared to neighbouring France, the differences are quite contrasting.

Last year's Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe caused some controversy, as Dylan Thomas survived a 40-minute Stewards' enquiry examining whether he had caused what seemed to be accidental interference to Soldier Of Fortune (who finished fifth) and / or Zambezi Sun (eighth). If the race had been run in England, the enquiry would not take long, and the result would certainly not have been altered. If it had been run in North America, the enquiry would again have been quicker, but Dylan Thomas could easily have been thrown out. His 'Arc' win is not the best of examples, however, simply because the interference appeared to be minor and he did not interfere one bit with his runner-up, Youmzain, but it certainly brought these issues back to the fore.

Two other championship races in recent years make for better studies. Firstly, the 2004 Arlington Million, when the Irish trained Powerscourt was an emphatic winner, passing the post a length and a half clear of Kicken Kris. A Stewards' enquiry was immediately announced. Powerscourt had caused interference to his rivals when passing the furlong-marker. He took the ground of the US trained Kicken Kris and the German challenger Epalo, who both appeared to be fighting a losing battle as Powerscourt quickened away.

TV commentators in England were quick to point out that Powerecourt was likely to be demoted, and also to state that he would almost certainly keep the race if this had happened in England. Powerscourt lost the race in the Stewards' room, and was placed fourth – i.e. behind the two he had interfered with. He may have been the best horse but he had broken the rules and there was therefore no way he would be allowed to keep the race. This makes sense to most observers, whether they have experience with horseracing or not. Though if you saw this year's Irish Derby perhaps it makes less sense, or at least confirms that there is no consistency in international Group / Grade 1 races. Alessandro Volta veered sharply across the track in the closing stages, and interfered with Curtain Call.

The Curragh Stewards demoted Alessandro Volta but they did *not* place him behind Curtain Call. An appeal was lodged by the connections of the latter, but it was dismissed. Comparing video recordings of this race, with recordings from the 2004 Arlington Million, makes that decision seem almost unbelievable.

#### **ARE RULE BREAKERS BEING REWARDED?**

Two years ago, we saw a finish to a race triggering a Stewards' enquiry which came to a conclusion that surprised even the most cynical of English observers. It was not just *any* race either, it was the Queen Anne Stakes at Royal Ascot. Ad Valorem won by a length and a half, beating Court Masterpiece, Proclamation and Peeress. Like Powerscourt in Chicago, Ad Valorem came off a true line in the closing stages. His erratic style was far worse, however, and squeezed both Court Masterpiece and Peeress sharply towards the rail. Not many of the 40,000 plus who were present, nor any in the vast TV audience, were surprised when an enquiry was called. Few could understand it when the outcome was announced, and Ad Valorem kept the race.

Many would say that 'he probably would have won in any case' but don't forget; although Ad Valorem and his rider had been found guilty of breaking the rules, the owner of the horse walked away with £141,950, which was £88,150 more than what Court Masterpiece earned for finishing second. And a massive £128,525 more than Peeress's share for finishing fourth. She was probably the main sufferer, having to be snatched right up inside the final furlong. Could she have won the race with a clear run? In my opinion, that is impossible to say. According to UK rules, it is very possible to say. This is a crucial point. Who's to judge whether a racehorse can recover from such a mishap and get back on level terms? Who's to judge, from observing a finish, which horse has most left in the tank?

Haven't we seen too many horses cruising on the bridle, only to find nothing when being asked to go faster, and equally too many horses rally to win races they seemed to be losing when coming off the bridle and being hard ridden just a furlong earlier, to realise that nobody can guess in a way English stewards are expected to. In America, the line is "when in doubt, throw him out". That may seem harsh but it does force riders to obey by the rules, not try to bend them in order to win big races. And, more importantly, it favours those who stick to the rules.

If you show a recording of the 2006 Queen Anne finish to the Stewards at Arlington Park, they would be quick to reach a verdict. They would have disqualified Ad Valorem. If you show a film of the 2004 Arlington Million to the Ascot Stewards, they would deliberate a bit before telling us that they would have allowed the result to stand. Who has the best system? Where do we find the best Stewards?

Larry Stratton, a bloodstock agent from New Zealand now based in Newmarket, makes interesting comments; "There is little doubt in my opinion that the best Stewards are those in Hong Kong and Australia, and it is no coincidence that those are the places with the most stringent rules and the toughest penalties. I think the problem is not one of the rules but the penalties. Basically what is happening in this country is that the Stewards are just giving jockeys a little tap on the knuckles rather than a full-blooded whack."

Another point, when Stewards decide whether a horse that had been interfered with, and was beaten, was denied an opportunity to put all of its energy into the finish, do they observe the horse coming back in? Do they have an opinion on whether the horse came back exhausted, or was hardly blowing at all? That would help but would still not suffice. A racehorse is more complex than just a physical beast. Some horses are mentally stronger than others, and it must at the very least be debatable whether it should be left to Stewards to decide if a horse 'was beaten anyway' when interference took place. This is not an attempt at knocking the Stewards in the UK, merely an attempt at focusing on how their rules, their guidelines, can work against them. Where there is an absolute need for clarity, there seems to be too many grey areas.

#### **BREEDING VALUES AT STAKE**

Finally, another aspect to this debate; When races like the 'Arc, the 'Million' and the 'Queen Anne' are staged, breeding values involved normally exceed the prizemoney. Ad Valorem's value as a stallion soared when he gained such a prestigious win. The financial 'domino effect' to the breeding industry is also an interesting factor, as results of Group One races have a direct impact on the value of broodmares of the contenders, any close relatives coming up for sales etc. Sometimes it can have an effect on the values of entire families.

Therefore, in pattern races, decisions made in Stewards' enquiries are far reaching. Thoroughbred racing and breeding is an international sport and business, and perhaps the rules on racing therefore ought to be made international. One would think that harmonising the rules in Europe could be a step in the right direction, towards bringing the racing world closer together. So it makes sense to all, even to those from the outside looking in. This may be no easy task - but it may be well worth investigating.