

# **Racing NSW Benchmark Programming and Handicapping**

## **Introduction, Background and reason for change**

### **POLICY REVIEW**

In early 2009 the Board of Racing NSW instituted a Review of its existing programming and handicapping policies.

The Review was required to:

1. address dissatisfaction with programming, handicapping and the Ratings system in NSW racing,
2. evaluate whether handicapping at Racing NSW equalised the chances of all runners in handicap races,
3. assess the merits and shortcomings of the NSW Ratings system, and
4. ensure any new policy aimed to improve:
  - a. returns to participants,
  - b. betting turnover,
  - c. field sizes, and
  - d. opportunities for horses to compete in suitable races,

### **INDUSTRY CONSULTATION**

Three acknowledged industry experts in race form assessment were invited by Racing NSW to provide a unified written set of recommendations for policy change. Previously all had made various oral submissions to Racing NSW or its predecessor the TRB on handicapping and programming

The expert's submissions and recommendations were submitted to Racing NSW in January 2009. After reviewing the submissions the Board of Racing NSW determined the recommendations be implemented after making any necessary amendments that emerged from industry consultation.

The three experts' [recommendation](#) were posted on the Racing NSW website and submissions invited from all interested parties.

50 submissions were received from industry participants by the closing date. Racing NSW reviewed every submission in the context of the recommendations.

As part of the industry consultation round, Racing NSW requested that the NSW Trainers' Association (NSWTA) systematically canvass Licensed Trainers across the State. The process was designed to seek and obtain the individual views of Trainers in writing before providing the NSWTA submission to Racing NSW.

NSWTA appointed Trainer delegates from within the member base in each Association to seek and collate Trainer responses. Over 175 individual NSW Trainers submitted a written response under the NSWTA process. Over 80% of Trainer responses were broadly in favour of the three experts' recommendations.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF NEW POLICIES AND PROCESSES**

The review and industry consultation processes confirmed that change was desired and that the three experts' recommendations, as modified, formed a sound basis for a new policy direction.

It was recognised that handicapping principles at Racing NSW had changed little in decades and relied on traditional manual methods. Even under the Ratings system and despite availability of some computerised records, post-race handicapping at Racing NSW applied a somewhat standardised set of weight penalties and concessions according to the finishing positions runners attained.

In contrast private handicapping employs today's information technology to identify potentially profitable differences between its objective measurements of merit and the more standardised allocation of weights by regulatory bodies. Private handicapping makes mathematical assessments of numerous race variables to form a fact-based view on the current racing ability of each horse. Finishing position is just one of the race performance indicators used to assess the true worth of a performance.

By interrogating established databases containing all NSW races over a decade, races of a specific class or grade were shown to vary widely in quality between individual runnings. Some races were seen to offer low prize money but attract high competition, or vice versa. Many historical assumptions about rigid relationships between venue, grade, purses and performance merit were shown to be invalid.

Likewise other variables such as the form cycles of runners were shown to affect finishing positions but were best able to be properly assessed and accounted for in computerised systems such as those used by private handicapping organisations.

Racing NSW came to see how adapting relevant capabilities of private handicapping could introduce merit assessment of individual race performances into the public (regulatory) process, modernise regulatory handicapping and help bring the desired policy recommendations to life.

For example, the Dual Band/Template system had evolved because the Ratings system had artificially elevated country performed horses against their Metropolitan performed counterparts. Statistical analysis of the entire NSW horse population proved the Dual Band/Template system should be discarded in favour of a single state-wide ranking for every horse.

Racing NSW then looked to contract an established private handicapping organisation to enable and support the timely introduction of merit based handicapping to NSW race fields. A new 3-stage process was developed to performance-assess each horse after every run, then allocate and publish updated rankings. The ranking would be called a Benchmark and would indicate the weight to be carried at the horse's next start relative to the entire horse population in NSW.

In stage 1 the contractor would make its computerised assessment. Stage 2 would be a review of the computer output by experienced independent form analysts within the contractor's staff before submitting the Benchmark recommendation to Racing NSW. Stage 3 would be a review of the Stage 2 Benchmark recommendation, together with relevant race and form information, by the Racing NSW handicapping dept. which would then publish the updated Benchmark.

The Benchmark was to show in simple form the capacity of each horse to compete within the entire NSW horse population, no matter where connections may choose to run it next.

The contractor was to provide a proprietary computer-based means of promptly assessing the true merit, relative to the entire NSW horse population, of the performance of each runner after every NSW race was decided.

Racing and Sports Pty Limited was contracted to supply Racing NSW a recommended Benchmark for all runners within (and no later than) 48 hours of every NSW race meeting.

At the same time practical changes were agreed within the handicapping department of Racing NSW. Benchmark recommendations from the contractor would be assessed by a panel rather than alone. The panel would review and consider the race film, steward's report and basis for the recommendation before releasing each new Benchmark. And a Liaison Officer would be appointed to take care of enquiries so handicappers could properly apply their time to the assessment process.

### **COMMENCEMENT OF BENCHMARKING SYSTEM – 1 OCTOBER 2009**

Racing NSW launched its Benchmark Handicapping and Programming model according to the process described above on 1 October 2009 after a State wide Information seminar process in early September explained the process to participants.

Racing NSW is committed to an accreditation process for the new system. Quarterly reviews and periodic Industry Consultation will form the basis to any adjustments to the BPaH model to ensure the objectives of the program are achieved.

View the Racing NSW [Policy document – Benchmark Programming and Handicapping.](#)