

The future lies in the past

Is the promotion of the Dubai International raceday really that different to the marketing of other sporting events? **Liz Price** thinks not as British Arabian horseracing made significant progress this summer promising an exciting future

Photography by GJ Multimedia

THE WIKIPEDIA page on horse racing includes comprehensive chapters on betting, racetracks, history and pedigrees. Yet, while it correctly identifies the thoroughbred as the main contender in 90 per cent of the world's horse races, its seven-line paragraph on the Arabian racehorse is to those who love the sport a huge disappointment.

Purebred Arabian horseracing is in fact practiced all over the world and has many followers, especially on the Arabian Peninsula where it often dominates thoroughbred racing.

When the various rulers in the Middle East started to take an interest in the British thoroughbred racing industry, they remained loyal to the Purebred Arabian, which, after all, provided the stallion the English thoroughbred breed is based on.

One of the first people to properly support Arabian racing in Britain more than 30 years ago, was and still is Sheikh Hamdan Al Maktoum, who breeds and races both thoroughbreds and Purebred Arabians.

He is the creator and sponsor of the Dubai International Arabian Race Day at Newbury, which is one of 11 stand-alone Purebred Arabian race days in the UK. The Dubai International Arabian Race Day has been a firm fixture since 2001 and regularly attracts big crowds.

Yet it is often criticised by racing's so-called "purists", who say that people only go to the race because they receive gifts or can win cars and trips to the United Arab Emirates. True, not every spectator actually goes because they are particularly fond of Arabian racing, but there are other incentives than just gifts.

This was confirmed by William Simmons,

“**Naturally we enter the competitions too, but it is really just about having a good time and combining our passion for horses with family fun**

a regular at the Berkshire venue. “On Arabian race day the atmosphere is totally different to a day like Lockinge day, when everyone is very serious and where you have to pay a hefty price for your ticket.

“When you have teenagers and you want to have a day out at the races, it can be very expensive, while on Arabian day you get in for free and you get to see horses run.

“You make as much money on betting on an Arabian as on a thoroughbred, because in the end you are betting on a horserace aren't you? It's really great, we always go with friends and it is just so relaxed.

“Naturally we enter the competitions too, but it is really just about having a good time and combining our passion for

The family can have some fun, Dad can have a bet and it's all for free on Dubai International day



horses with family fun.”

Arabian racing is not the only sport that makes use of one of the oldest and most successful marketing strategies in the world. In fact, what about the thoroughbred meetings that nowadays nearly all include a Ladies' day?

Do these women really come to see champions such as Frankel at Newmarket or York, or are they too lured by prizes of cars and shopping vouchers for the best-dressed lady?

And yes, there is a very valuable incentive for journalists to write about the Dubai day, but again, what is the difference between

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GBR, which pays jockeys to give interviews to tabloids so that the sport remains in the headlines?

Or to take it outside racing, how many hotels offer fabulous stays to journalists so that they write about it in a national newspaper?

Today, without an initial investment, may it be gifts, free entrance, premiums or a rise in prize-money, no sport will survive and even less get off the ground. In the case of Arabian racing, there can be no doubt that the different investments over the last ten to 15 years has taken the sport to new heights.

Maybe not in terms of a higher number of owners, trainers or horses – in fact the

The cards for Arabian racing have been carried in the *Racing Post* for the first time this summer



opposite is true as the 63 entries in this year's edition of the Dubai International Day compared to last year's 90 entries, show.

But it certainly has managed to raise its profile as race cards are now printed in the *Racing Post* and for the first time this year, a Purebred Arabian Group 1 race, the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Harwood International Stakes, worth £150 000, will take its place on the same card as the St Leger, the world's oldest Classic.

There are those who will criticise the presence or the interest of an Arabian on such a prestigious race day, but then again they will also be the same people who talk

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through a Jon Bon Jovi performance before the Rolling Stones come on stage.

“It is a landmark event,” confirms Philip Brennan, who through the company Sportsguide looks after the Dubai International Race day interests and who is also involved in the promotion of the Group 1 Qatar race at Doncaster.

“It represents the first Arabian race on a Classic card in the UK and it demonstrates how far we have come in Arabian racing.

“We have had high-profile races on high-profile cards such as the Lockinge or the King George, but an Arabian race on a Classic day is taking it another step further.”

While Arabian racing has made its way into the general perception of racegoers and turns up regularly on British racecards, it now has to follow up with attracting more licensed trainers and owners.

There are far too few Arabian horses in Britain; you can hardly count the Julian Smart-trained Arabians that come to Lambourn for the summer as “British-trained”.

One of the reasons why the number of Arabians in training is stagnating rather than growing, and this despite the ever-increasing prize-money (£251,127 in 2007 to more than £500,000 in 2013), is the fact that the BHA rules, unlike the French rules, don't allow Arabians to be trained out of the same yard as a thoroughbred.

Robin Mounsey from the BHA explains: “Arab racing in Britain has amateur status and it is not permitted to train amateur horses from a professional yard. Should Arab racing change its status from an amateur to a professional sport, then it is possible that the rule preventing British professional trainers training Arab horses could be reconsidered.”

While Arabian racing has successfully raised its profile externally it now has to make changes internally if it wants to continue on the upwards curb.

Genny Haynes from the Arabian Racing Organisation, which is the sole authority for Arabian Racing in the UK concludes: “The international perception of Arabian Racing in Britain is that it is becoming increasingly more professional and we should aim to keep up with that perception in order to maintain the levels of interest and investment we receive particularly from the Gulf states.

“We have a loyal band of supporters domestically who have come on an incredibly long journey with us during the development of Arabian racing and we hope that they would support any further moves towards professional status.” ■

