

This was in International Thoroughbred Dec. 2009, it has been updated.

The recent discussion of the “unfairness” of the weight-for-age system has likely been an attempt to introduce fresh slant on the annual hyperbole on the “best horse ever seen”. Some remarks made by people who ought to know better cannot be ignored. That such a simple, and essential, concept as weight for age could ever be misunderstood reflects poorly upon the trade media.

Retirement to stud inevitably reduces the numbers of classy four-year-olds. The younger generation always comprises a fuller complement and so might be expected to do a bit better than the seniors without that fact implying that the scale was faulty. Three-year-olds can often avoid running in all-age condition races if they look too hot, but old horses have little choice. The modern programme has too few non-handicaps to show clearly whether the allowances do need to be altered. If the number of handicaps was reduced from over 60% of all races to the traditional level of around 45% then soundness of the intergenerational allowances might be easier to judge.

Weight allowances have a long history. Until the nineteenth century many racehorses were virtually ponies, and “Give and Take” races used a weight-for-inches format to give the smaller ones a chance. Fourteen hands carried nine stone, with fourteen ounces added or taken off for every eighth of an inch difference, which comes out at seven pounds per inch.

Early racehorses were a product of their times; they were invariably aged and were, perhaps literally, battle-hardened. Newmarket races often started from Six Mile Bottom and finished at the top-of-the-town; some took place over eight miles and started at Balsham. Shorter races of four miles were run in heats on the heath itself.

At the time horses were not considered to be aged, in the sense of fully mature rather than geriatric, until they were seven. Younger and less seasoned horses could not handle such gruelling tasks against older ones any better than 13 hands animals could handle 15 hands opposition. On level terms, the defeat of a younger horse by an old one was almost inevitable. In the 1750s Heber’s Calendar coined the term weight-for-age for a scale of allowances to be used in “Whim” – from whimsical –plates.

The convention became that aged horses conceded weight to six-year-olds, who gave weight to five-year-olds, as did those in turn to four-year-

olds. At that time four-year-olds would receive two stone from aged horses at four-mile heats and there seemed to be no question of three-year-olds joining in.

Racehorses arrive at their full strength much earlier nowadays. Young stock, like hot house plants, are better nourished. Today's training is far less debilitating than was the eighteenth and nineteenth century regime with its long sweating gallops and bloodletting. Yet it might be that, as with flowers, "forced maturity guarantees early decline". Most seven-year-old flat horses are well past their best nowadays, and horses like Pheidippides and Le Garcon D'Or, or jumpers like Sonny Somers, are unlikely to reappear

Horses that survived old school training were virtually indestructible. A lack of their in-depth fitness likely contributes to abbreviated careers nowadays. Red Rum, who won in March as a two-year-old, was a notable exception to the theory of precocity and premature obsolescence.

Goldsmith Maid trotted within half a second of her own world record on her twentieth birthday; she was unbroken until she was six and she never raced until she was eight. A lack of "bottom" almost certainly explains the so-called "bounce factor" when horses nowadays fail dismally to repeat a good effort that came after a lengthy break. Fit horses ought to be capable of turning out again overnight, even if not after just twenty minutes to catch their breath between heats.

Weight-for-age is not a handicapping exercise and to refer to in such terms is misleading; it aims to align age groups rather than individual horses. By neutralising the transient physiological advantage that older horses hold over comparable juniors *at any given moment* it hopes to achieve a fair evaluation of the younger ones' eventual potential. Mensa examinations aim to quantify underlying intelligence as opposed to acquired knowledge in much the same way.

Today's four-year-olds are quite capable of running against their elders of equal standing on even terms. Three-year-olds, as a group, are not, and only the weight-for-age allowance allows reasonable competition between successive classic crops.

Admiral Rous produced his standard scale of weight for age in the early 1870s and the Jockey Club adopted it in 1880. It has survived with relatively little change simply because it has worked quite well in practice. In 2017 and 2018 there were small reductions in the allowances

over longer distances, probably stemming from some media condemnation of the whole concept as unfair. Three-year-old allowances throughout the summer may be too generous; if so, it appears to result from an apparently unrecognised anomaly earlier in the tables.

Most two-year-olds probably do improve up to forty pounds by mid-summer of their second season. Precocious sprinting juveniles may have already made half that improvement before June as two-year-olds, but that rate of improvement started in extreme youth, from a low base, and will not continue; likely they come on by half as much again by the “end of the Flat” in November. However, the assumption that 30 lbs. of progress over the old traditional Turf season of March to November will be followed by just eight pounds improvement over the next six months is quite illogical.

Two-year-old allowances over a mile commence in August. They taper by 14 pounds throughout August, September, and October but by just 4 pounds in the next four winter months. This dramatic falling off in the presumed rate of improvement - from five pounds per month to a total of just four pounds between November and March – cannot be right.

This anomaly may stem from an assumption by Admiral Rous that horses “marked time” when they were thrown out of training over the winter. Now we have year-round racing and training, and the theory that two-year-olds develop three or four times as quickly in the autumn as in the following months needs to be revisited. If there were more races for two-and-up it might show that back-end two-year-olds were badly treated, rather than three-year-olds being well treated in the spring.

As things stand, the current scale appears to favour three-year-olds in the spring due to the partial amnesty throughout the winter. However, there is no denying that many trainers were reluctant to run “ordinary” three-year-olds in all-age handicaps even in days when lower bottom weights and bigger fields allowed more of them into the handicap proper. Smoothing the peaks and troughs into a regularly dwindling allowance would not make trainers of three-year-olds any bolder, but it would make more sense.

Nevertheless, Rous’s system has largely stood the test of time; without it there could be no comparison of the classic crops unless or until more of the best horses remained in training at five, or even as six-year-olds. Quite apart from the financial impracticality of missing two stud seasons with a horse at the height of his fame, relatively few horses will remain at

their very best either physically or mentally for a fourth season, and any conclusions to be drawn would most likely be quite inaccurate.

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