

BHA Handicapping Ombudsman – result of appeal – So Scottish

**Decision:**

So Scottish chase mark to be dropped 1 lb from 143 to 142.

**Background:**

So Scottish was allotted a BHA performance figure of 140 for his effort in finishing second off a BHA mark of 135 behind Boothill in the Jim Barry Wines Hurst Park Handicap Chase at Ascot on 19th November 2022, his most recent start.

So Scottish was entered for the Magners Plate Handicap Chase at Cheltenham on 16th March. After a review of his form, he was allotted a mark of 143 on 28th February, prior to the unveiling of the weights for the handicaps at the Cheltenham Festival.

Following that decision, and after following steps 1 and 2 in the handicapping appeals process, So Scottish's trainer Emmet Mullins submitted an appeal to the Handicapping Ombudsman, on the grounds that the new mark is too high.

Because the Hurst Park is run over 2 miles and the Plate over 2m4f, the original assessment and the review were undertaken by different handicappers.

**Evidence:**

The 3 lb rise in the mark for So Scottish, from the Ascot performance figure of 140 to the mark of 143 is made up of two elements, 2 lb for a review of the Ascot form and the subsequent performances of those that contested the race; 1 lb for applying a different value to the margin between Boothill and So Scottish, 1¼ lengths taken as a value of 2 lb originally but as 1 lb when reviewed.

In reviewing the form of the Ascot race, the handicapper concerned looked at the subsequent performances of the other horses in the race and chose to tie So Scottish's mark in with the winner Boothill. Boothill had initially been raised from 140 to 147. He has since run 4 times in Pattern events for novices and been given performance figures for those runs of 148, 149, 149 (initially 150) and 145. His current BHA mark is 149, i.e. 2 lb above the mark originally given after Ascot.

So Scottish's connections argued that tying So Scottish in with the improvement made by Boothill was unfair, given Boothill was having just his third run in a chase at Ascot and had potential for plenty of improvement. They pointed out that the marks of the third and fourth horses at Ascot had subsequently dropped. They also presented current examples where similar subsequent improvement by progressive horses had not resulted in the marks of those close to them being raised collaterally.

They questioned why So Scottish was now only 1 lb better off with Boothill, when he had initially been 2 lb better off.

**Findings:**

The handicapper concerned with reviewing So Scottish's mark presented clear and logical arguments as to why it was considered most appropriate to raise the mark collaterally with Boothill's improvement, rather than to leave the mark unchanged.

So Scottish was also having just his third run over fences at Ascot, finished clear of the other runners and was closing the gap on the winner after the last fence.

Therefore a 2 lb rise in So Scottish's initial post-Ascot mark looks fully justified.

The handicapper concerned used a different value for the gap of 1¼ lengths between Boothill and So Scottish to that used by the handicapper involved in assessing the form originally, using the rate at which So Scottish was closing in the last 1f to make that 1 lb rather than 2 lb.

While the reasoning was sound, the method had been available to the handicapper who had assessed the race originally and they had chosen not to employ it. Therefore it seems fair to restore the 2 lb differential and reduce So Scottish's mark of 143 by 1 lb.

### **Further comments:**

This case raised several issues in relation to the way in which Irish-trained horses are dealt with by the handicappers, putting their connections at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing what their mark will be and their ability to appeal it.

Although the handicappers assess Irish races as part of their duties, they do not publish marks for horses until they are entered in Britain. Nor do they update as a matter of course marks for Irish-trained horses to have run here, even if they have run most recently in Britain, as is the case with So Scottish.

The first opportunity So Scottish's connections had to appeal was after the weights for the Plate at Cheltenham were published. As a result, any appeal would be academic with regard to that race, as it would not be possible to change the mark.

So Scottish would have had an active mark had he been trained in Britain, one which his connections could have appealed before the Cheltenham weights were published.

While Irish trainers have options such as entering in other British races prior to Cheltenham or contacting the handicapping team for an indication of what their horse's mark might be, that places the onus (and in the case of entering, expense) on connections and may not give them anything solid to appeal about in the latter case.

In the interests of fairness, it would be useful to have in place a means of indicating to connections of overseas-trained horses in Premier Handicaps (Heritage Handicaps on the Flat) as soon as practically possible what their current mark is at the time of entry.

It is appreciated that having that process in place may involve more work for the handicapping team, and there may be another way to achieve the same end.