

BHA Handicapping Ombudsman – result of appeal – A Dream To Share

Decision

That A Dream To Share should not be allotted a handicap mark.

Background

A Dream To Share won his first five starts in bumpers, including the Champion Bumper at Cheltenham and the Grade 1 bumper at the Punchestown Festival in 2023. He ran once in a bumper in February of the 2023/24 season after missing an intended hurdling debut the previous November.

A Dream To Share ran twice over hurdles during the 2024/25 season, where he was let down by novicey jumping.

A Dream To Share ran twice in large-field maidens on soft ground at the Curragh in March, finishing fourth each time, over 1m and then over 7f 13 days later. In each race, he was nearest at the finish after being held up, tactics consistent with those employed in bumpers.

A Dream To Share was then off for nearly 12 weeks, reappearing in a qualified riders maiden over 1m7f on good ground at Leopardstown on 19th June. Starting at 2/1-on, and ridden by Mr J. L. Gleeson, who had ridden him in bumpers, A Dream To Share won by 1½ lengths from Royal Hollow, seeming to win with a lot in hand in a steadily-run race.

On 29th June, the Irish Handicapper concerned informed A Dream To Share's connections that he would decline to give the horse a mark in handicaps.

A Dream To Share was declared to run at Galway on 1st August, but was withdrawn due to a temperature. No further entries were made in Ireland between that date and this enquiry.

The Irish Handicapper reaffirmed his intention to decline to give the horse a mark on 20th August.

A Dream To Share was entered in a handicap at York's Ebor meeting and in the Cesarewitch at Newmarket on 11th October. The BHA Handicapper concerned declined to give the horse a mark in either race, this decision initially conveyed to connections on 15th August.

Following that decision, and after following steps 1 and 2 in the handicapping appeals process, A Dream To Share's owner Mr J. P. McManus submitted an appeal to the Handicapping Ombudsman, on the grounds that a handicap mark should have been given.

Evidence

(NB all marks referred to are those current at the time of the appeal)

Evidence was sought from Mr McManus, as well as from the BHA Head of Handicapping and the Handicapper concerned with the two races for which A Dream To Share had been entered as to the reasons why a mark had been declined, and from the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, to confirm certain facts.

Mr McManus, in support of his case, provided two documents, a 37-point argument from Mr Graeme McPherson KC on the merits of the case, and an assessment of the form of A Dream To Share's race at Leopardstown by Mr Phil Smith, the former Head of Handicapping at the BHA.

While it was accepted by the appellant that the refusal of the Irish Handicapper to give a mark to A Dream To Share in June was justified, given the lack of Flat form among the other runners in the Leopardstown race, by mid-August five of those that finished behind A Dream To Share now had handicap marks and the third, Arch Empire, who did not, had run twice subsequently.

Therefore, the argument went, there was more than enough form to reverse the previous refusal, which was seemingly based on the lack of it. Mr Smith's document made a clear case for how the Leopardstown race might be assessed and a mark arrived at.

Several of the points made by Mr McPherson were put to the BHA Head of Handicapping. In particular, Mr McPherson had drawn a parallel with a previous appeal, that by connections of Nimbus Boy, who had been refused a mark by the BHA, even though he had a hurdles handicap mark in Ireland. This demonstrated that the BHA Handicappers were prepared to take a different view from their Irish counterparts.

The BHA Head of Handicapping explained that, due to difference in methods employed by the Irish Flat and Jumps handicapping teams, the two examples were not the same. The Handicapper concerned subsequently confirmed that, while the BHA Jumps team keep their own figures and observations for Irish races and act on them as necessary, the BHA Flat team accepts Irish assessments as a matter of course.

The Handicapper concerned confirmed that had A Dream To Share been given a mark by the Irish Handicapper then they would have allocated the horse a BHA mark the same as its Irish mark.

[As an example, the Handicapper concerned was asked about the case of Buddy One, a hurdler with a BHA mark of 153. Buddy One has run three times on the Flat, performing to a modest level in two starts in 2023, at a time when he was around 20 lb inferior to the hurdler he is now, and then winning a 1m5f maiden at Ballinrobe in July. Buddy One, even more than A Dream To Share, has only one piece of Flat form. He, however, has an Irish Flat mark of 84 and has been given that to run off of in the Cesarewitch, even though his hurdles form clearly suggests, albeit in another discipline, a higher level of ability.]

Findings

In reaching a decision in this case, the first question to ask is whether the BHA Handicappers in their assessment of the horse have been fair, both to the connections of the horse and to the connections of other horses against which it might race. Have the handicappers used all the tools available to them and done so in accordance with good handicapping practice.

Secondly, it is important to determine whether the handicappers have been consistent in their approach, that is, have they treated the horse concerned any differently from how they would treat any other horse.

In considering the first point, as both Mr McPherson and Mr Smith state, in support of the appellant, it is certainly now possible to allocate a mark, based on the subsequent performances of those that ran behind the horse at Leopardstown, in particular the second and third. The difficulty lies primarily in assessing the extra value for ease of success, but, as they also point out, that is part of the everyday work of a handicapper.

Given the marks allotted by the Irish Handicappers to the second Royal Hollow and (unpublished) to the third Arch Empire, a mark of 94 on the bare form with significant extra value would be

appropriate. It would not be stretching the ease of A Dream To Share's victory to add an extra 10 lb for value, making a mark of 104.

That mark might still underestimate the ability of A Dream To Share, but 10 lb for ease of victory is a significant amount and would require considerable improvement on the bare form to make a major impact in a race so well contested as the Cesarewitch. In terms of being fair to both the connections of A Dream To Share and to the connections of other runners, a mark of 104 would seem appropriate.

However, in considering the second point, the BHA Handicapper concerned has followed what is their usual practice in the case of an Irish-trained and -raced horse entered in a handicap in Britain. Had A Dream To Share been given a mark in Ireland, then the Handicapper concerned would have given the horse the same mark to race off of in Britain, just as they have done with the very similar case of Buddy One.

The connections of A Dream To Share were told by the Irish Handicapper on 29th June that he would decline to give the horse a mark; crucially he confirmed this view on 20th August. The latter refusal came, even though there was now more evidence on which to make an accurate assessment of A Dream To Share's performance.

Whether the Irish Handicapper was right to still refuse a mark for A Dream To Share is not a matter for this enquiry.

Further comments

It was clearly unfortunate that the timing of events meant that the connections of A Dream To Share appealed in the first instance against the decision of the BHA Handicapper rather than that of the IHRB Handicapper. The actions of the latter informed the decisions of the former and it is the original refusal, on 29th June, followed up by a confirmation on 20th August, that needed to be tested.

What was even more unfortunate was that A Dream To Share was unable to run at Galway on 1st August, which might well have made this whole process unnecessary.

[ENDS]