

BHA Handicapping Ombudsman – result of appeal – Masterpiece

Decision

That Masterpiece's Flat mark should be increased from 15 to 34.

Background

Masterpiece had three starts in bumpers, winning at Newcastle on his third outing, and a run in a maiden hurdle, when pulled up over 2½ m at Sedgefield, reported by his rider to have weakened quickly. He had a break of 215 days after his debut and another of 154 days before his hurdles run.

Masterpiece was sold from Rebecca Menzies' yard for £10,000 in May 2025. He returned for his Flat debut for his current stable after another absence (313 days) in a 1m class 4 novice at Newcastle in February, when he finished last of three runners, starting at 14/1 and beaten 28 lengths.

Masterpiece had two further runs on the Flat, both in class 3 novices over 1m3f at Southwell, finishing tenth of 11, starting at 150/1 and beaten 41 lengths on 4th March, and sixth of 7, starting at 300/1 and beaten 66 lengths, on 11th April.

After his third run, Masterpiece was allotted a BHA Handicap mark on the Flat of 15. Following that decision, and after following steps 1 and 2 in the handicapping appeals process, Masterpiece's trainer Patrick Morris submitted an appeal to the Handicapping Ombudsman, on the grounds that the handicap mark given was too low.

It should be noted that, following a change in the Rules at the start of the year, horses are not allowed to run from more than 15 lb out of the weights in handicaps. Therefore, Masterpiece, in effect, would be unable to run in a handicap with such a low mark.

Evidence

Masterpiece's trainer Patrick Morris argued that the race programme left him with a lack of options as to where he could run Masterpiece, and therefore had had to run the horse in unsuitable races, over an inadequate trip and out of his grade in an attempt to get a mark.

He pointed out that one of the horses that Masterpiece had finished in front of, Raja Charger, had a mark of 33, despite never having beaten a rival in four starts. With a mark of 15, his horse would be unable to run in a handicap and would have very few other chances to improve his mark enough to do so.

The BHA Handicapper in question talked through their decision making with regard to the mark allotted to Masterpiece. They explained that 15 was the figure that they had Masterpiece running to in the first two of his three runs on the Flat. On his third run, Masterpiece was beaten so far that he was not recorded as having run to a positive figure.

When asked about Raja Charger's mark of 33, the handicapper in question explained that they had Raja Charger performing to 33 and 29 in the first two of his four races and therefore were happy to give him a mark of 33.

They pointed out that there are somewhere between 20 and 30 horses on file rated 30 or below and that they have been firm in their stance when asked by connections to reconsider the rating in order

to try and get horses a run in a handicap – connections have been told they would have to keep running in novices/maidens or wait for a possible run in a 0-50 Classified. Should they then put up an improved mathematical performance (almost certainly in a slowly-run race) they would take the opportunity to raise their rating – but the move would have to be justified by the maths surrounding the performance figure.

When asked about whether they had considered the use of position figures to allot a mark, the handicapper said that they were very rarely if ever used on the Flat, though are sometimes used over jumps.

In terms of future options for Masterpiece, the handicapper pointed to a series of 0-50 Classifieds which are in the programme in June and July, though they admitted that these races tend to be very popular. With a mark of 15, Masterpiece might be in danger of being balloted out.

Findings

In terms of the way in which the Handicapper in question has assessed Masterpiece's form, using standard handicapping practice, there is nothing to fault, and a mark of 15 is a reasonable interpretation of the horse's performances. However, there were other steps that could have been taken, using other accepted methods, which would allow Masterpiece to have at least one run in a handicap.

Raja Charger, for example, has shown form of very dubious merit – his two rated performances were in moderately-run races over 1m on all-weather and in two subsequent runs he has been unable to run to a positive figure in more truly-run contests.

Looking at the finishing order of the second of Masterpiece's two runs, the one in which he finished ahead of Raja Charger, there is a pattern in relation to current handicap marks and starting prices on the day

90 7/4
78 13/2 (135 hurdles mark)
82 4/7
71 50/1
73 50/1
54 50/1
56 50/1
56 25/1
66 50/1 (best run on turf)
NQ 150/1
15 150/1
33 200/1

In other words, apart from the favourite and possibly the eighth, the runners in a soundly-run race have finished in roughly the order that would be expected by the market and, with the exception of the ninth, who ran better on turf next time out, they are in roughly the order that their current marks would indicate.

Obviously, Masterpiece and Raja Charger are also exceptions. It may be that a mark of 33 overstates Raja Charger's ability, but that is not the point at issue. If it is excepted that Raja Charger

is entitled to run off a mark of 33 in a handicap, then it seems equitable, as well as in the interests of getting a horse into a handicap where possible, to give a horse that has beaten him a mark above 33, particularly if it is one which doesn't look out of place in relation to the other horses that they ran against.

Therefore, by this method, it is possible to give Masterpiece a mark of 34.

Further Comments

Although Masterpiece's form in bumpers obviously couldn't be taken into account in relation to an actual mark on the Flat, it is evidence of ability, whether he retains it or not a moot point, and as such could have had some bearing on whether or not to give the horse a higher mark than the one indicated by standard handicapping methods.

It is accepted that position figures have limited application in Flat racing, compared to jump racing, and races like the Southwell one where the wide range of ability of the runners and the pace of the race allowed the field to finish so well strung out and in an approximate order of ability will not occur that often.

There is an anomaly with classified stakes, in that these are races based around handicap marks, but where the rule about not being able to run from 15 lb out of the handicap doesn't apply. Yet the disadvantage to the horse with a mark of 15 is even worse than it would be in a handicap, where at least the horse would receive weight.

[ENDS]