BHA Handicapping Ombudsman – result of appeal – Traprain Law (Fr)

Decision

That Traprain Law's chase mark should remain at 130.

Background

Traprain Law ran four times over hurdles for David Cottin in France in the 2021/22 season, finishing third three times. He was then moved to Lucinda Russell for the 2022/23 season and continued to be raced over hurdles. After being beaten on his handicap debut/second start of the season, he had a breathing operation. He then won at Kelso on his second handicap start (ridden then and for all subsequent starts by Patrick Wadge) off a mark of 107, after which his mark was raised to 114.

Traprain Law then ran twice back in novice hurdles, winning on the second occasion. His BHA mark remained unchanged. He then won a handicap at Ayr in March, starting 5/4 favourite, before being beaten in a higher grade handicap at Ayr in April off 119. His mark was raised after that to 120.

Traprain Law was switched to fences for the current season. He made his chasing debut off 120 in a class 3 novice handicap at Ayr (effectively a 0-138, 2m ½f, Good to Soft) in November, beaten 4½ lengths into third behind Marble Sands. He then ran off the same mark in a class 3 0-130 at Kelso (2m1f, Heavy) in December, sent off at 2/1-on, and won easily by six lengths from Duty Calls. His mark was raised subsequently to 130.

Following that decision, and after following steps 1 and 2 in the handicapping appeals process, Traprain Law's trainer Lucinda Russell submitted an appeal to the Handicapping Ombudsman, on the grounds that the handicap mark given was too high.

Evidence

The BHA Handicapper who had assessed the Kelso race made Traprain Law value for a 12-length winning margin, after taking timings on the run-in of the margin at that point between the winner and runner-up. They considered that that was a fair representation of the superiority of the winner over the second, which led to allotting a mark of 130, at the higher end of the range (128-130) the handicapper considered allotting. A rise of 10 lb allowed Traprain Law to run again in a 0-130, but potentially gave the same rivals he had beaten at Kelso more of a chance against him.

Lucinda Russell and Traprain Law's owner questioned the quality of the Kelso race; although it was a 0-130, they felt it was a weak race, featuring out-of-form horses. They felt the Handicapper had overestimated the superiority of Traprain Law over Duty Calls. They particularly felt that the rise of 10 lb was harsh in relation to the runner-up from the previous Ayr race (Parisencore). If that pair were to meet again off their current marks, Traprain Law would be 6 lb worse off with Parisencore, despite being beaten 2¼ lengths by him at Ayr.

The BHA Handicapper's argument was that tying Traprain Law's mark to that of Parisencore was not a measure that would normally be employed, particularly with horses having their first runs over fences. They pointed out that Traprain Law was two years younger than Parisencore and had a progressive profile over hurdles, his final run at Ayr being his best. Parisencore was a consistent sort over hurdles, rather than progressive, and a less obvious type to improve over fences. [By contrast, Traprain Law's connections felt the defeat at Ayr had shown the limit of the horse's ability as a

hurdler]

The BHA Handicapper also pointed out that the Handicapper who had assessed the Ayr race had noted that Traprain Law was better than his position, having gone a bit hard in front.

Findings

The easy manner of Traprain Law's victory at Kelso clearly required the BHA Handicapper to add extra value to the winning margin of six lengths. Their efforts to quantify this through trying to measure the distance the winner went clear on the run-in represent standard handicapping practice, and assessing the win as value for double is by no means excessive [It is worth noting that the same handicapper assessed chasing debutant Issar d'Airy, a horse with a very similar profile that won at Newbury the day after Traprain Law won at Kelso; his winning margin of 4¼ lengths was called 10 lb for the ease of victory].

While the point about the weakness of the Kelso race made by connections of Traprain Law is perfectly valid, the Handicapper is required to try and frame the weights to be fair for all runners; as such a rise of 10 lb gives Duty Calls a chance of turning the tables on revised terms.

With regard to the point about Traprain Law being worse off with Parisencore, despite being beaten by him at Ayr, the first three in that race were all chasing debutants and all having their first run since the spring. Therefore, it would be unwise to take the relationship between the three of them as set in stone, with different subsequent rates of improvement (or not) very likely, as has so far proved the case.

The winner Marble Sands was quite well beaten in graded novice company next time (his mark was then dropped to 141, having initially gone up to 143); Parisencore ran well in defeat, beaten a neck off a mark 1 lb higher, in another novice handicap (for which effort he was raised 3 lb). Therefore, Parisencore would be 1 lb worse off with Marble Sands, even though he had been beaten 2¼ lengths by him at Ayr. It is true that Traprain Law would be worse off with both first and second from Ayr, which may be partly a consequence of the grade each has contested. However, at this point he looks to have improved most from the Ayr run and that justifies the rise in his mark.

Further Comments

Although it is not a factor in judging this matter, it is noted that the handicappers for both Timeform and Racing Post have taken a very similar view of the easy nature of Traprain Law's performance at Kelso. Timeform has given him a rating 8 lb higher as a result, assessing that he gave Duty Calls a 30 lb beating (23 lb plus an extra 7 lb for value). Racing Post has raised his rating 16 lb (having probably had the Ayr race too low), with again the win taken as value for a 30 lb beating of Duty Calls.

[ENDS]