

Jockeys suffer burnout at a 40% higher rate than other professional sports – fixture list change is sorely needed

Aodhagan Conlon is a former Conditional Jockey, who is currently studying for a PhD. He has an MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology and is Performance Consultant to the PJA and its members. His thesis for his MSc explored athlete burnout in professional jockeys and he wrote the following article at the start of this year for publication in the Racing Post though it never appeared. We publish that article below to coincide with Mental Health Awareness Week.

The racing industry is groaning under the pressure of a weighty fixture list which is having a considerable impact on the mental health of its participants. Real change is needed. Block rest periods of two full weeks at the end of the flat season and three full weeks in the summer for jumping are proposed for the current fixture list. This would allow all participants in the industry sufficient time to recover physically from a punishing schedule which should in turn provide a chance for the mind to restore.

Mental health has tended towards of something of a catchphrase of late. An individual or group tweets something mental health related, we all retweet and like it for a day or two and then normal service is resumed without a noticeable change in the industry. The drive regarding mental health awareness, although necessary, also brings the prospect of diluting the message and turning it into a mere box ticking exercise. To what degree are we truly committed to addressing mental health?

The tragic circumstances surrounding Richard Woolacott last year illustrates that the concern is a lot closer to the surface than we would care to admit. This is not to dismiss the valuable efforts of organisations that have made conscious efforts to address these issues. Racing Welfare has worked tirelessly in developing structures of support for mental health and addiction issues amongst the racing community, investing £22,987 in 2017 on counselling. The Professional Jockeys Association (PJA) has invested nearly £100,000 in the last three years around mental health awareness and support. This has manifested in the form of the Jockey Matters videos to help raise awareness, providing treatment with the clinical support group Cognacity and my own service as a performance consultant. To date, nearly one out of every seven professional jockeys in the UK has approached the PJA and consequently received support.

Horseracing is demanding, physically, mentally and emotionally. For trainers, jockeys and stable staff the grind is a constant but it is this grind that creates the characters, both human and equine, that make the sport great. Racing builds great resilience. Ask anyone who has left the industry and they will tell you of the priceless lessons learned and then applied with success in the outside world. But can we tell when the grind goes too far? At what point are we asking too much of those who are at the heart of racing on a daily basis?

I have recently finished academic research into the levels of athlete burnout in professional jockeys in the UK. Although having only observed jockeys, I feel that the research provides a glimpse of the industry as a whole. Athlete burnout is a set of symptoms which, if left unchecked, can lead to clinical depression. It consists of three dimensions:

(1) A reduced sense of accomplishment: This is how much an athlete feels that their professional achievements compare to the amount of personal effort that they have invested.

(2) Emotional/physical exhaustion.

(3) Sport devaluation: The amount of value you put on your chosen sport.

Of the jockeys that were surveyed, 17% showed high levels of burnout (the normal average of other athletic groups is 12%). As a whole group, 76% had high levels of reduced sense of accomplishment and 64% reported high levels of emotional/physical exhaustion. It would be difficult to address the reduced sense of accomplishment dimension. Sport requires a high level of personal investment and not everyone will achieve what they set out to do. This is not a grievance. The very nature of horseracing is that only a select hardworking and talented few reach the top, not everyone will become champion jockey, win the Derby or Gold Cup. There is a chance however, that we can affect levels of emotional/physical exhaustion. My research also asked jockeys qualitative questions one of which was: 'If you could change one thing about racing what would it be?'. Over half answered that they would like more structured time off. This is where the difference I feel can be made.

I understand that racing is struggling for its share in the betting market but whose health is at risk when putting on more and more fixtures? Sport is moving on. In rugby, the advancements in strength and conditioning have increased the physicality of the game and consequently the levels of attrition on the body. To match the increasing intensity of professional rugby, players' minutes on the pitch are now managed to ensure sufficient recovery time. Racing is due its greatest ever number of meetings in 2019. The increasing intensity of the fixture list has not been met by sufficient recovery periods for jockeys.

Flat jockeys appear hungry in every meaning of the word but also acknowledge that something needs to give. I personally met with several high profile flat jockeys at a meeting in Bath over the summer. They showed signs of extreme fatigue and one jockey, having endured a particularly busy weeks driving, declared that he was "just absolutely fried". At the height of the competitive season where it's expected an athlete would be at their peak, it was hardly an advertisement of the "jockey athlete" that we are trying to promote.

Rest periods are hard fought for but appreciated. Dale Gibson, PJA Executive Director, reported:

"With the sheer intensity of the fixture list and work load, we were pleased to secure two short breaks in 2019 for the Flat Jockeys alongside earlier evening finish times during the blanket all weather period, but this needs to be the start of something far more substantial. Aodhagán's findings of mental and physical burn out amongst Jockeys substantiate our long-held view that meaningful breaks for those that put the show on the road are vital under both codes."

Having spoken with jockeys from both codes it is difficult to get a unanimous solution and this complexity will layer considerably when other parties such as trainers, stable staff and racecourses are consulted. Having looked at the current calendar and listened to jockeys, here are the proposed improvements:

- Three consecutive weeks off for in the summer (Jumps)
- Two weeks off after Doncaster's November meeting and a full week off in January (Flat)

The 2019 fixture list shows 28 days between June and August where no jump racing takes place but these are sporadically placed. June appears to provide the best opportunity for the national hunt

fraternity to take a step back. Winter horses, for the most part, have been put out on their holidays; trainers have had a chance to continue to run horses that may be enjoying the good ground throughout the month of May, while Royal Ascot provides a notable distraction for punters and industry professionals alike. While the six days post the November Handicap meeting at Doncaster were warmly received, a general consensus amongst flat jockeys was that two weeks without any flat racing at the end of the turf season would provide respite before the all-weather season clicks into gear. Conversely, a subsequent week off in January would be so as not to overlap with turf season preparations.

Although the research carried out was exclusively on jockeys, it should be clear to see how the dimensions of athlete burnout could be applied to trainers and stable staff and equally, how the proposed changes could be beneficial. Time off for trainers is limited when accounting for entries, declarations, going racing or to the sales, not to mention the daily running of a business. The present stable staff shortage has been well documented and yet it is comical that as the industry is trying to encourage people into racing, it is hammering those already involved.

Needless to say, proposals like these will meet with the usual uproar that accompanies any whisper of change within racing. I admit my ignorance of the complexities of organising the fixture list but, my opinion is at least informed if not complete. The proposed block rest periods would go some way in providing preventative respite for all participants from both physical and emotional fatigue. If racing considers itself serious about looking after the physical and mental well-being of all participants within the industry then this conversation needs to happen.