

## **253rd Gimcrack Speech**

My President, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an honour to deliver the 253rd Gimcrack Dinner speech. I would like to thank Bridget, William, and the York Race Committee for this privilege. This is one of British racing's most prestigious events, and as I look at the list of illustrious past speakers, I cannot help but feel the committee may have shortchanged you tonight. But do not worry—I will aim to be brief and allow the main act Richard to entertain you.

I have had the privilege of living in York for 13 years and have long sought the elusive Yorkshire adoption status. I have been told the required papers can only be approved after 15 years but Nicholas Wrigley kindly informed me earlier tonight that if I do not make a spectacular mess of this speech, he will accelerate discussions with John Sanderson and Norman Gundill to get early approval. No pressure, then.

By way of introduction, I have spent 25 years in the bookmaking industry and was previously CEO of Flutter's UK and Ireland division and prior to that I was part of the Sky Betting and Gaming business for 10 years. I am now the Chairperson of Racing Media Group (RMG), and I have also been involved in both Project Pace and Project Beacon, two strategic initiatives aimed at re-energising British racing.

As an enthusiastic racing fan and owner of several horses, mostly slow ones - at least the others were impressively fast on the gallops—I have experienced the highs and lows of our sport. I love racing from both a betting perspective and it is also such a vibrant social occasion; from a cold winter's day in Wetherby to a summer's day on the Knavesmire, its tremendous fun and you meet such an eclectic group of people. Racing has provided me with some of the most enjoyable days of my life. It is this personal connection that drives my belief in the need for radical change to secure its future.

Tonight, I will focus on three key challenges facing British racing and propose three solutions. I have chosen three points because I suspect tomorrow morning, after York's famous hospitality, three is the maximum number anyone will remember. Usually this speech falls into a "call for arms" category, tonight I am going to pivot slightly and instead have a "call to action."

British racing is at a critical inflection point. It is tempting to focus on a narrative of doom, but I do not share that view. Yes, the challenges are real—but so are the solutions. To overcome these challenges, we need stakeholder compromise, empowered leadership, and a clear mandate for change.

Radical change should be non-negotiable. Doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results is as they say, the definition of insanity. Tonight, if you take

just one thing away, let it be this challenge to your self . *What can I do to positively influence change in British racing?*

### **Challenge 1: Racing's Relationship with Bookmakers**

Betting on horse racing is in long-term decline, and this threatens the deeply interconnected relationship between racing and betting. Racing and betting have a symbiotic relationship. Bookmakers rely on racing content, while racing depends heavily on betting revenue—a relationship that has provided significant revenue streams to our sport.

Please do not attribute this declining trend solely to regulation or affordability checks—despite what you might read in the papers. Regulatory impact has accelerated the decline, but this decline started several years ago. Racing's share of betting revenue has been falling steadily due to shifts in consumer behaviour and preferences.

Bookmakers have also played a role in contributing to the decline. Innovative products such as Bet Builders on football engage younger audiences and bookmakers are finding greater returns from other sports and products. Racing is no longer a profitable venture for bookmakers as the sport is perceived by many as costly and expensive, and that is a worrying position for any commercial partner to be in. It is vital we address friction areas and start winning the war for Bookmakers marketing budget or we risk continued disengagement.

Opportunity to strengthen the relationship is real: We need to re-engage with bookmakers by demonstrating that racing is serious about growing its audience and putting innovation at the heart of the sport. Initiatives such as The Sunday Series and The Jockeys Cup are positive examples of how we can make progress. We need to partner more with bookmaking to collaborate and develop joint initiatives that create new innovative products tailored to our sport, which modernise the betting experience and appeal to younger audiences. Ask yourself: <when was the last truly innovative product racing introduced? To thrive, we must create products and experiences that are compelling, affordable, and relevant to both bookmakers and customers alike.

Bookmakers excel at engaging their audiences as they operate in an incredibly competitive landscape. We need to work with them on shared audience development to co-market racing to younger demographics to increase engagement. It is vital we offer flexibility in fixtures and content that maximises - revenue potential. We must do all this whilst ensuring racing offers a value for money product. Fundamentally we must position racing as a differentiator. Racing needs bookmakers, they are critical for funding, audience reach, and product innovation. We need to demonstrate why racing content is important and show how it provides a unique and differentiated product. Developing shared goals with bookmakers will create a long-term sustainable income

that is vital for our sport. Building a relationship that focuses on long-term growth, not short-term profit maximisation at the expense of each other will be mutually beneficial.

## **Challenge 2: Governance**

Racing's governance model is not fit for the 21st century. Racing's decision-making is spread across multiple bodies, leading to a lack of clear direction. Decision-making is slow, complex, and often paralysed by self-interest. Every stakeholder wants a seat at the decision-making table, but this results in inefficiency and a lack of accountability. Let me pose another question: *Who is responsible for promoting the sport and growing the customer base?* There is a lack of accountability and it's often unclear who is responsible for promoting racing, driving customer engagement, or even implementing key changes.

The current setup dilutes responsibility. Fixture planning and innovation are stymied by competing interest, leading to stakeholders often prioritising their own interests, creating friction and delays in decisions. Incremental fixes or compromised solutions are prioritised over systemic change, resulting in a piecemeal approach that fails to address the root issues.

**Opportunity for modernising Racing** - we need a streamlined governance model that empowers a re-energised and restructured British Horseracing Authority (BHA) to lead with a clear vision and strategic plan. The BHA must be given both the financial resources and the mandate to deliver transformative change. Without bold action and a united blueprint for the future, we risk falling further behind. Give the BHA a clear mandate to promote the sport, innovate, and make decisions. Equip leadership with the people and tools needed to execute long-term strategies. There are significant lessons to be learned from other sports. The Premier League centralised decision-making which has allowed it to thrive globally, with strong commercial strategies and streamlined governance. Formula one was a heritage sport, that was seen as the preserve of the elite, and it has been reimagined and reinvigorated in recent years. It was transformed through a combination of visionary leadership and a focus on entertainment value and making the sport more accessible. Matchroom have similarly transformed Boxing and darts. The common denominators here are empowered decision-makers and streamlined governance.

It is vital we align stakeholder interests, and you can only do that by having strategic goals that everyone knows will grow the sport. If we introduce mechanisms to ensure that all stakeholders work towards common goals, such as shared financial incentives for growth in attendance, betting, and ownership – we will have a much healthier sport.

Racing governance must evolve to mirror corporate Britain. No individual should be allowed to sit on multiple committees, and strict standards must be enforced to eliminate conflicts of interest, particularly when investing in companies that directly

profit from racing. Racing needs a modern governance model that can make bold, decisive moves to secure its future. Without change, the sport risks becoming obsolete in a fast-moving, consumer-driven leisure market.

### **Challenge 3: Consumer Engagement**

Racing is a leisure activity, and we are competing in a crowded market for the consumers wallet. Declining attendances, generational shifts, and welfare concerns all contribute to the challenges we face. The UK leisure market is worth £115 billion annually yet racing accounts for just £4 billion of that. There is immense growth potential but engaging younger audiences while retaining our loyal base is no small task.

#### **The Opportunity to engage:**

Consumer engagement is not just about marketing the sport; it requires a systematic reimagining of racing as a modern, relevant, and inclusive leisure activity.

To secure our future, we must reimagine how racing engages with consumers across four key touchpoints: watching, betting, attending, and ownership. The sport can attract new fans while deepening the connection with its existing audience. This is about reshaping how racing fits into modern society.

We need to create a fan engagement strategy which puts the consumer to the fore of racing across all touchpoints and addresses current gaps.

We need collective investment in a centre of excellence to drive engagement across the consumer touchpoints of watching, betting, attending, and ownership. A detailed understanding of our existing and potential audiences is essential. This includes addressing concerns about welfare, affordability, and relevance. *Racing is a sport enjoyed by millions, and by leveraging our social license, we can inspire the next generation of fans and secure a vibrant future.* We need to focus on accessibility and simplify the ways fans can engage, from affordable ownership options to easy streaming of races. Innovation should be at the heart of this engagement strategy.

To broaden the sports fan base, we need to invest in research and data to gain a deeper understanding of why fans engage with racing and why some reject it? Using these insights, we can tailor marketing campaigns and reshape racing's image. We have an opportunity to utilise partnerships to broaden reach, collaborating with media and streaming platforms, and partner with influencers, jockeys, and trainers who resonate with younger demographics to promote racing.

We must tell a story about our sport. Creating captivating content is vital to highlighting stories about our stars - the horses, jockeys, and trainers to make the sport more relatable. Many in this room are lucky they get the opportunity to experience the industry behind the scenes but to attract a new younger audience who want access to

content, we must provide that behind the scenes engaging content. Racing is an emotional rollercoaster and could provide the most compelling content. This will be alien to many in the room but for a new younger audience, jockey's dancing in the weighing room, or fashion at the races will engage far more than horses fighting out the finish of a race. There is so much to learn from other sports about consumer engagement. We really need to lift our heads above the racing parapet.

Finally, let me leave you with a thought from Disney CEO Bob Iger: *"You cannot let tradition get in the way of innovation. There is a need to respect the past, but it is a mistake to revere the past."*

British racing stands at a critical juncture. What sustained us in the past will not secure our future. To achieve sustainable growth, we must embrace a bold vision—one that redefines our relationships with commercial partners, streamlines governance, and transforms how we engage with consumers.

If we are willing to embrace change, put self-interest aside, and act decisively, I firmly believe British racing can not only survive but thrive for generations to come.

As a betting man, here's where I'd place my wager:

1. **Reorganise the BHA**—equip it with the resources it needs to govern effectively and promote the sport with purpose.
2. **Put consumer engagement at the heart of the strategy**—we must make racing relevant, accessible, and exciting for a modern audience. Use our scale to leverage our social license.
3. **Reset the relationship with bookmakers**—forge a win-win partnership that ensures mutual growth and long-term prosperity.

Remember the call to action we discussed earlier: ***What can you do to positively influence change in racing?*** Each of us has a role to play, and together, we can seize this opportunity to secure a brighter future.

So now, I invite you all to stand and join me in a toast: **To the future prosperity of British racing!**