

BRUCE MILLINGTONThe Thursday
column

Racing can learn from captivating competitions

GREYHOUND RACING, it pains me to say, is in a sorry old state. Crowds are down, tracks are under massive financial pressure, trainers are on their knees and it is, for the most part, a hopelessly poor betting medium.

That's down to a combination of ludicrously big on-course tote retentions and, more pertinently, savagely uncompetitive betting percentages that, in the case of most Bags races, represent little short of exploitation of those without the numerical nous to know better.

Thanks to the indomitable spirit and enthusiasm of owners, trainers and their staff, the game limps on, but it is not a shining beacon of 21st century sporting excellence from which others can learn.

Except, perhaps, in one respect. A guy from Racing For Change, the project aimed at boosting racing's popularity and thus its wellbeing, popped by for a chat the other day.

We discussed a few ideas and I told him one thing that has mystified me for a while is why horses don't compete against each other in the way that greyhounds do.

The one thing that for many people keeps greyhound racing on their sporting radar is the big competitions, the 48-dog stakes that start with eight heats and, through four rounds of action, provide a captivating fortnight-long story of intrigue, excitement and mystery, culminating in a whowonit climax, often shown live on

Sky, that gives you narrative by the bucketload.

It works wonderfully well for dog racing, so why not for horses? I daresay those many folk with a world-class can't-do attitude could come up with a juicy list of reasons why it might not work, but I defy anyone to tell me the following event would not be worth trying at least.

The London Cup. An event for 64 milers of any standard from any nation. To be run at Kempton over six weeks, with all races taking place on Wednesday evenings. The best 64 entries (decided by official ratings) are drawn randomly in eight heats to be run on the first night of competition. The first four in each heat go through to the next round, to be run a fortnight later.

Again, the first four in each quarter-final progress to the semis 14 days hence, with the final taking place two weeks after that. Prize money would depend on sponsorship and entry fees but if you could ensure the winner would pick up at least 50 grand you'd surely be in business.

Imagine the interest. It would be great. You could ensure heat winners had first pick of stall numbers, followed by runners-up, etc, and there could be reserves in case of injury. There'd be plenty of ante-post betting activity, fans would engage with the runners as they progressed and Kempton could offer attractive attendance packages for those present for all four rounds.

If it worked, there would be nothing stopping other events



Clijsters knockback was baffling

PECULIAR knockback of the week (well, only knockback of the week)...

Boylesports would not lay me £50 each-way at 14-1 on

Kim Clijsters (below) in the US Open, but they did lay me £49 each-way.

If it makes you happy, lads.

at other tracks over other distances.

Hell, if the greyhound-style concept took off there could even be simultaneous events over a variety of distances culminating in a super-duper finals day at one of the top-rank courses.

Wiser owls than me could, I'm sure, take this idea, refine it and make it work really well.

If it flopped, what's the problem? No harm done. If it proved popular, as I'm convinced it would, it could provide racing with a much-needed shot in the arm.

Dreary Chelsea transfer ban is giving me the blues

THE aftermath of Eduardo's dive bored us silly, the fallout from Bloodgate had us reaching for the anti-depressants. Now, just when you thought it was safe to start reading the sports pages again, along comes a topic so dull it makes watching your toenails grow seem as exciting as a visit to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory with Kelly Brook.

Don't get me wrong, when the news broke that Chelsea had been barred from buying during the next two transfer windows, it was mildly exciting. But the penny quickly

dropped that once that initial surge of interest abated, we would be facing another media overkill potentially even more dull than the others.

And so it has proved. Every tupenny ha'penny club on mainland Europe has come bursting out of the woodwork to claim a Premier League giant has ridden roughshod over the rulebook in pursuit of young talent.

It's becoming unbearable. I feel sorry for any clubs that have had their prize assets prised from them for meagre recompense, but not enough to

want to digest six thousand words on the subject every day.

Here's a suggestion papers and radio and TV stations can have for free: when covering football, why not discuss, erm, football? That's football as in tactics, the effects of key injuries, stories about who is playing well and who has lost their form, insights into upcoming talent, that kind of thing.

Football is actually quite interesting, yet it seems increasingly like the last thing anyone wants to actually talk

about when they cover the sport these days.

An honourable recent exception goes to Tuesday evening's debate on Talksport in which Stan Collymore argued with passion, eloquence and extreme good sense on the absurdity of David Beckham remaining part of the England squad.

This is not a sentence I would have thought I'd ever write until a couple of years ago but Collymore is now, in my humble opinion, among the best sports broadcasters in the business.

Farcical start to top flight is curbing our enthusiasm

WHATEVER your views on the assertion that the Premier League is the greatest league in the world (I believe Sky, for one, lean towards this being true), you cannot possibly be of the opinion that it commences in a way unmatched anywhere else on the planet.

Basically, if it was a horserace it would be the 1993 Grand National or the 2008 Prix de l'Abbaye. In other words, an utter mess.

Here we are nearly four weeks into the new campaign and already there are eight teams who have a game in hand, while there have also been two

Saturdays squandered so we can endure a couple of helpings of increasingly tedious and pointless international friendlies.

It is obviously difficult to schedule an English football season.

Not only do you have the aforementioned futile friendlies, but there is also the tiresome Carling Cup to fit in plus other occasional nuisances like the European Super Cup.

However, it should not be beyond the game's rulers to ensure games in hand only become a factor when extreme weather conditions cause postponements.

THE LATEST EXTRACT FROM KEVIN PULLEIN'S DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO BETTING ON FOOTBALL PAGE 107