



# op/ed

by barry irwin

## IS IT TIME TO RENEW SCHOLARSHIP IN AMERICAN RACING? by Barry Irwin

When I worked at *The Blood-Horse* in the winter of 1970, I remember how excited everybody was about publication of the Experimental Free Handicap. When I edited *The Thoroughbred of California* in the early 1970s, I remember how excited we were to see how the California-based and -bred juvenile would be treated in the weights.

Back in those historic days, breeders hoped like hell that fillies bred and raced by them would get any weight assignment, even if it was down in the 106-pound level, because in that era, having a filly that got weighted meant something for a future broodmare. Broodmare bands were built on such ratings by successful breeders.

In late January, when the panel charged with producing the Experimental Free Handicap for next season reveals its weights, the number of professional horsemen and women that give any sort of hoot at all wouldn't be enough to start a game of Texas Hold 'Em.

There are a few reasons for the decline in import of the Experimental Free Handicap and the apathy with which it is received by the racing and breeding public.

The main reason, which not so coincidentally is the same reason that *The Blood-Horse* no longer produces its year-end Free Handicaps, is that those whose responsibility it has been to create the weights have demonstrated an annoying lack of interest in generating the scholarship and work necessary to bring meaning to the task at hand.

This is especially true of *The Blood-Horse* weights, which were produced by some of the greatest minds the game has ever known, as best exemplified by F. E. (Jimmy) Kilroe. Doing the weights took time and thought and dedication. When the task fell upon the shoulders of the next generation, it was allowed to lapse into oblivion, thereby robbing the racing and breeding industry of one of two sources for classifying the best older racehorses to compete in North America on an annual basis.

The Experimental Free Handicap is still produced, but political correctness, lack of scholarship and lack of interest on the part of those hired to generate the weights has sapped the list of its vigor and importance.

In the old days, just a few years after the Guttenberg Bible was produced, professionals and fans alike would eagerly await publication of the weights, in some cases just to see what lightly raced juvenile had caught the eye of the handicapper. The weights back then generated a lot of Triple Crown buzz.

Nowadays, given the restrictions placed on the exercise, horses that do not make their mark in a stakes race are never seen on the Experimental Free Handicap. The list is now made of horses that ran at least fourth in a graded or listed stakes race, one suspects because these horses are easier to locate and identify. It would take work to find and evaluate the diamonds in the rough.

What once was a great pursuit to uncover and reveal future nuggets of greatness has now turned into a boring recitation of the obvious.

Kilroe's Free Handicaps and *Daily Racing Form's* similar lists for many years complimented the exercise of classifying horses for the American racing industry and concentrated on the older runners, while the Experimental Free Handicap concerned itself with 2-year-old males and females.

I remember pestering the handicapper responsible for *The Blood-Horse* Free Handicap about when he was going to send his ratings to the editor, because I wanted to find out where horses of mine in the 1980s stood on the list compared to others runners in North America. I wanted confirmation that horses of mine such as Prized and Political Ambition compared favorably with other 3-year-old grass horses.

The great thing about Kilroe doing the weights is that even though he grew up on the East Coast and was the racing secretary for the New York Racing Association, he was not a homer and he endeavored to do the best job he could in evaluating North America's best runners.

Kilroe was a man of great integrity and, like *The Blood-Horse* editor Joe Estes, a man nobody ever accused of sucking up to an owner by giving a runner of his a better rating. Their like was rarer than a Triple Crown winner.

Today, with *The Blood-Horse* Free Handicap long gone, with the Racing Manual a shadow of its former self, with the old Racehorses of Such and Such a Year long gone, North American racing must rely solely on the anemic and tired Experimental Free Handicap as its

only attempt at meaningful weights.

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North America, you must realize, may be the only racing jurisdiction in which there is no system for the publication of ratings and weights to classify its best horses.

I race all over the world and have done so for several decades.

I am not alone in this, as several other Americans annually race horses abroad. We that do realize the level of scholarship that is applied by the Jockey Clubs of other nations in rating horses for the benefit of breeders, trainers, horseplayers, the media and racing fans. English and Irish racing is in the main virtually totally dependent on ratings from its racing authorities.

While European countries produce full sets of international ratings and local ratings, we in the good old United States of John Wayne must be content with Mike Watchmaker's top 10 in various categories as published once a week in *Daily Racing Form*. No knock against Mike, but how can one compare this with what Kilroe used to generate?

People like me now rely on speed figures generated by the likes of Jerry Brown, Len Friedman and Andy Beyer to classify horses. Timeform has entered the arena, but so far their numbers are inconsistent and hard to relate to for Americans.

Americans are entitled to have their horses classified. It is the responsibility of The Jockey Club and its affiliates and the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association to hire the right people to produce a full and comprehensive list of weights/ratings for the North American Thoroughbred population.

Right now, as part of the International Federation of Horseracing, weights for the very, very best American-based horses are generated. But that is the tip of the iceberg. We need and crave more than that. And we deserve an Experimental Free Handicap that is done without any guidelines and preconditions. We need an Experimental Free Handicap that looks at the most talented runners, regardless of whether they made their mark in stakes company. That is where scholarship must be applied.