

(MARTIN HANNAN)

## Sorry tale of Garthdee track confirms that honesty is only policy that endures

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PEOPLE often ask me why I keep banging on about integrity in racing. Their usual way of broaching the subject is: "Don't you know the game's bent?"

Too many scandals have arisen over the years for people to remain convinced that British racing is an incorruptible oasis in a desert of sleaze. I'm certainly no longer sure that our racing is the cleanest in the world. The forthcoming Panorama programme investigating the murky depths will be bad enough, but details of the Brian Wright drugs-money- laundering case, when they are made public after the prolonged Jockey Club inquiry will shock racing to its very core.

A number of well-known figures will be banned from racing for a long time - for life, it is hoped. An overhaul of the national security system may follow; certainly, the Jockey Club's security officers would like to see their role beefed up, and so would the police.

In June, Brian Wright's son, also Brian, and his worldwide gang were sentenced to a total of 215 years for running a complex drug-smuggling and money-laundering operation. Wright Snr is still at large, having allowed his son to take the rap, a 16-year sentence.

The gang plotted to put drugs money into normal circulation through betting, using a range of informers and horse nobblers to ensure that the bets were as risk-free as possible. As many as 23 horses were doped by one former jockey in the late 1980s, and he was not working alone.

Wright and his cohorts are despicable, but those in racing who helped them are as bad, and it is to be hoped that they will be exposed and shunned.

Yet, I'm still pretty certain that the vast majority of officials, owners, trainers, jockeys and bookmakers carry out their work honestly, and detest corruption, since they know how much it damages racing.

If you don't believe that integrity counts in every form of racing, I can recall what happened to Aberdeen Greyhound Stadium. In 1968, rumours abounded that the Garthdee stadium, the most-northerly track operating under National Greyhound Racing Club rules, was to close. A grand gala evening was held to boost the stadium's fading popularity, and no less a personage than 'Miss Greyhound Racing' attended, with 2,000 punters.

The event went flat, however, when bookies refused to lay bets on the third race. The second race had been won by six lengths by Balalaika Guy, and they had been hammered by a large number of late bets from off the track on that dog and another contestant, Splendatious - lots of forecast bets involving both had also been made. Sure enough, Balalaika Guy and Splendatious were first and

second, and the rest nowhere, and the bookies smelled a rat - though it might well have been rat poison which stopped the other dogs.

The third race went ahead with only Tote betting, but again there was a sensational development. Mount Brown was withdrawn late after the vet was called in. The stadium manager, George Letts, declared the race void, as the dog appeared to have been 'got at', then Kingmaster failed the pre-race test for the fifth race.

Uproar at Garthdee got worse as the night wore on. The last race was also a farce, Letts declaring it void after a record number of bets were placed on Scrap Merchant, who beat his rivals by a distance. As bookies and punters raged, Letts was forced to call police.

The damage was done.

Aberdeen Greyhound Stadium's reputation had been fatally damaged. Sickened by the events of the gala evening, the punters failed to return in numbers, and the Garthdee track closed barely a year later, to be handed over to a supermarket developer.

There are still a number of greyhound-racing aficionados in the Aberdeen area, but they have to travel to Shawfield in Glasgow if they want to see dogs that are running under National Greyhound Racing Club rules.

Thus, if you wish to confirm why integrity is the cornerstone of the racing game, just ask an Aberdonian greyhound enthusiast.

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