

Alterations to the Weight For Age Scale – Q&A

Have you based these decisions on a statistically significant sample?

The data analysis is extensive. It compares any differences in the strike rate for three-year-olds against older horses over a period of six years. It looks at the differences between each year, month and by distance across a sample of over 89,000 runners in handicaps and 5,000 runners in weight for age races, comparing finishing position, rivals beaten, average winning distance and more. Extensive analysis was also carried out by the Irish Turf Club. Their findings mirrored the BHA's.

Why have you focused on handicaps?

The Weight For Age Scale is applied to all Flat races run in Britain; this includes all handicaps as well as weight for age races. Handicaps are a better testing ground in which to review the effectiveness of the Scale because:

1. The sample size is considerable and time relevant. In 2015 alone, there were 3,178 Flat handicaps for three-year-olds and upwards, and the sample size across the last six years captures 89,385 runners. To obtain a similar sample of weight for age races, it would be necessary to go back a considerable way in Pattern race history, in which penalties for winners are also not applied.
2. Handicaps represent a relatively equable environment from which to assess performance data. In theory handicaps are designed to pitch horses together (that are of similar ability with the overall ratings file) and to provide them, regardless of age, with an equal chance.
3. The pool of horses participating in handicaps is consistent year on year. There is no need to consider that the variable nature in talent of successive generations might confuse the data. Weight for age races, particularly those where no penalties are applied, are often affected by the cycle of generations and the quality of the three-year-old crop in any given year.

So you've focused on handicaps, but what anomalies have you considered?

The analysis went on to eliminate any possible variables that might affect the result. Variables tested include:

1. Relatively unexposed three-year-olds having their first few runs in handicaps. Concern was expressed that it can be difficult to get a handle on the ability and likely progression of some lightly raced three-year-olds. Unexposed horses were eliminated from the sample in the event that they had run fewer than 3 times in handicaps.
2. Horses that are stepping up in trip (often to a more suitable distance) for the first time. It is accepted that often three-year-olds will be stepping up in distance as they progress through the year. Some may improve for racing over further, which could result in them outperforming their handicap rating earned over shorter distances. Three-year-olds stepping up in trip by more than 2 furlongs were identified and separated from the main sample.
3. Horses winning by a narrow margin. Strike rate is naturally a binary outcome; one can either win or lose a race. While it still provides a good test of the effectiveness of the scale, we also considered Average Winning Distance (by how far did the horse win a race) and the

finishing position of other horses too, achieved using Rivals Beaten (see more detail on this point below).

4. The BHA's Handicappers keeping up with the rate of decline of older horses. A second analysis was undertaken that compared the strike rate of three-year-olds and four-year-olds only, eliminating all horses from the sample aged five and up. Similar trends were shown, suggesting that this variable was not having an impact on the result.

Did you carry out an analysis of weight for age races as well?

Yes. In order to capture a fair and robust sample of weight for age races, only those runners not carrying penalties in Black Type races were used. This increased the sample size from c. 560 runners in Group 1 races over the last six years to 5,136 unpenalised runners in Black Type races. The trends shown were very similar, albeit there was a generational influence when comparing each year or crop of three-year-olds.

How have you calculated Strike Rate (SR), Rivals Beaten (RB) and Average Winning Distance (AWD)?

Strike Rate is primarily concerned with the winners of races. It is a sum of total winners (by age group) divided by the total number of runners in the same age group.

Rivals Beaten offers an alternative to the win/lose strike rate by giving consideration to all the runners in a race and their finishing positions, irrespective of the number of horses in the field. Rivals Beaten plots the position of each horse in the race (e.g. a three-year-old winner will have beaten 100% of his rivals) and then takes an average of the percentages for all three-year-olds for the category concerned. Anything above 50% for that age group represents an advantage.

Average Winning Distance is fairly self-explanatory, we have used mean rather than median on account of the sample size and the existence of very few outliers.

What changes are being made to the Scale, and when?

The Weight For Age allowance for three-year-olds will be altered from 2017, with the first change coming into effect from the first half of June over 14 and 15 furlongs. Most other changes will be introduced from the first half of July over 10 furlongs and above. The alterations to the Scale range in size from 1lb at 10, 11 and 12 furlongs to a maximum decrease of 3lb over longer distances where the advantage afforded to three-year-olds was shown to be the most acute.

In addition, changes to the four-year-old allowance between January and July, which naturally flow from the adjustments to the three-year-old allowance, will not come into effect until January 2018 (i.e. when the same pool of three-year-olds in 2017 ultimately turn four).

Did all trainers support the proposals?

We are aware that what we have proposed may not suit everyone. We accept that some participants and trainers would like to use the Weight For Age Scale in a different way, in order to continue to give an advantage to three-year-olds. However, the changes we are making are in line with the original and fundamental principles of the Weight For Age Scale and it is our firm belief that no horse should be knowingly advantaged by a Scale which was designed to ensure fairness.

Could you have made exceptions for big races?

It is the view of the BHA that a difference of 1lb will not greatly alter the approach of trainers to major races if they feel that they have a three-year-old who is good enough to compete in those races. Once the data showed consistent evidence that three-year-olds are being advantaged, it was correct that the Scale should be altered for all races.

The new Scale's adoption at the EPC was dependent on no races being given exceptions. It was agreed that races being given exceptions in one country may have unintended consequences in terms of damaging races in other countries.

Why have you only made changes to races over 10 furlongs and above?

At 9 furlongs and below, it was felt by the international handicappers that the case for change was not strong. While evidence from British races might have supported a 1lb reduction in the Weight For Age allowance at 9 furlongs, the data evidence from other countries suggested there was less of a problem in Europe over this particular trip; hence each country has instead committed to (in the short-term) keeping this distance category under particular review.

Initially this is a trial. We are going to monitor the impact and over coming years can adjust the Scale further if evidence supports this.

Will these changes not have an impact on the breed of stayers in Britain?

The vast majority of stayers are actually four-year-olds and above, and the fact is that it is these horses who are currently being disadvantaged. This development should actually encourage them to stay in training in Britain. Meanwhile, a separate project is ongoing to carry out a detailed review of the stayers' programme in Britain and throughout Europe in order to safeguard the future of these horses.