



There is going and there is going



Forelegs going in deep.

“GOING Racing”. The word “Horse” is unnecessary whereas “Motor” and its variants, also “Greyhound” and “Pigeon” are required to complete the definition.

Google “Types of racing in UK” and the first six results are all Horse Racing, switching lower down to combustion engines, then a mixture.

Committed “racegoers” form the corps of the second highest on-site sports watching crowds in GB, albeit by dint of multiple daily events to attend, many in lovely parts of the country.

Those who get most from the variety in this criss-cross-the-country sport are the owners, partners and syndicate members. Wow, do they “Go Racing”, driving short or long, often staying overnight. Managers must keep ahead of them although managers admittedly do much of the scheduling in tandem with trainers, representing the owners’ interests and ambitions.

Trainers often have reasons not to travel or need to be at another course, but do their share of attending meetings.

Scheduling a racing career at ordinary levels is complex. Aside from the array of races at each distance and class, more or less all being accessible from any place of training, the other meaning of “Going” comes into play big time.

Where regional racing in South Africa, Australia and USA is usually carried out in steady climates, the pan-GB options are subject to Atlantic fronts, hot air from the south and good growing conditions in a jumble of variations.

Our runner for a Hintlesham Racing syndicate last Friday evening at Doncaster (Home of the St Leger) does not want the word “Firm” in the Going. Firm or Good to Firm: No. But Good, Good to Soft, just the ticket.

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But if the Going moves to officially Soft, all the rules change. At some tracks, they get through Soft quite easily but at others such as Newbury and sometimes Doncaster, the ground becomes bottomless, horrible.

Instead of a many-times driven 3¼ hours each way, undoubtedly to be messed up by Friday afternoon traffic going north, I took the train to be sociable with syndicate members who might fancy a glass or two. Four trains each way, actually, if including two quick tube legs. On the long leg, we hurtled up the rapid East Coast Line from King's Cross in 100 minutes. Doncaster first stop. The train was rammed with tourists heading for Bradford for Bronte Country for their almost-first-hand dose of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights.



Torrential rain in Doncaster Parade Ring.

For optimal Going at “Donnie”, we needed a bit of rain. We had declared on “Good to Soft (Soft in Places)” after thunderstorms in South Yorkshire. Declarations are at 10am two days before running. With changeable weather, this is a recipe for non-runners. It used to be one day until 1999. (Then) impoverished UK Racing accepted a paltry sum from gambling interests to go a day early to allow detailed race cards to be printed in South East Asia. Good Grief! Thank Heavens the new much-publicised legislation has sorted the finances out big time after 50+ years of nonsense. In spite of the money that has gone elsewhere, GB has a rich, in another sense, panoply of racing. The future now looks fantastic.

We had anticipated three days (including the day of

the evening racing) of mostly drying conditions. If it were to dry up too much, we could withdraw without penalty – albeit having incurred several hundred pounds in costs sending the horse and staff and retaining the jockey – if the ground description changed. It did change. To Good. It had no sting in it and passed muster on two “in house” inspections.

One, when we were on the train, was conducted by our Travelling Head Lad. There was no give in the ground but it was still Good. Two hours later, the trainer left me to call it as to whether we run or not. I walked the course at 5.30pm (for a 7.30 race). “Good”, stick going in 2-3 inches, nice cover of grass, no jar, safe ground. No harm to run. After another hour, this deep and meaningful exercise was rendered meaningless because unpredicted rain started to fall. By 6.30 the ground had changed back to Good to Soft. So far so good.

United Kingdom's surface grades

In the UK, there are seven grades of surface, which are:

- hard
- firm
- good to firm
- good
- good to soft
- soft
- heavy

Racecourses often add “Good to Firm in places” after Firm or Good and all variations e.g. Soft (Good to Soft in places), thus multiplying the above seven grades.

Australia's ten grades

For comparison purposes, here are

- Firm 1: Dry hard track
- Firm 2: Firm track with reasonable grass coverage
- Good 3: Track with good grass coverage and cushion
- Good 4: Track with some give in it
- Soft 5: Track with a reasonable amount of give in it
- Soft 6: Moist but not a badly affected track
- Soft 7: More rain-affected track that will chop out
- Heavy 8: Rain affected track that horses will get into
- Heavy 9: Wet track getting into a squelchy area
- Heavy 10: Heaviest category track, very wet, towards saturation,

In the Owners & Trainers at Doncaster, we were provided with a complimentary choice of healthy

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Soft ground racing.

salads, pasta or mouth-watering roast pork and stuffing in a bap. What do you think we chose? The owning team washed it down with a pint or two while I headed for the weighing room to see how the jockeys thought things were “going” in the downpour.

They came in from the race before ours looking like they’d ridden in the National in a monsoon. The ground changed to Soft. Oh No. The trainer of the favourite in ours gave me an old fashioned look, surrendering any chance of winning. Two other runners were withdrawn in the half an hour leading up to the race. No penalty! It had changed – but the other way to Soft!

Owners love watching their bonded boy or girl being tacked up. We all got soaked in the process and arrived wet through in the Parade Ring, with or without coats. You had to laugh. The market turned upside down as soggy bookies under brollies adjusted their sights. We remained second favourite, but by then who knew?

Not blaming the members for dashing for cover, I stayed in the Parade Ring near the big screen under a random racecourse umbrella with our three stalwart employees ruefully recalling past washouts.

Our fellow was given a perfect ride and pulled out to win his race. He looked like doing so, giving us a brief shout, until tiring in the (very) Soft. Three mudlarks beat us –sluicing up (literally) -and we were best of the rest, an understandable 4th. On closer analysis, his lovely action at Newmarket a couple of weeks beforehand was replaced by the effort of pulling his legs out of the ground.

Ah well, 4th paid for his day and he ran with full commitment. Slapping a wet neck and pressing a wet banknote into the hands of our horse’s handler, we made a bolt for the cab rank and were at Doncaster Station in time to catch an earlier London train, phoning reports to those members not on course.

The others headed to Liverpool Street Station and did damage at one of the wine bars overlooking the concourse, while I, still a little damp, changed at Leicester Square for Waterloo and got home 11 hours after I had left. Never a dull moment. - tt.

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