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PRESS RELEASE

The National Horseracing Authority updated letter to SANTA

RE: UPCOMING HANDICAPPING WORKSHOP HELD BY SANTA

The National Horseracing Authority (NHA) reaffirms its commitment to inclusion, transparency, and fairness across the racing industry. This serves as an update to the Handicappers' letter to SANTA dated 20 January 2026, ensuring that all stakeholders have access to current information ahead of policy discussions at the forthcoming SANTA held Workshop.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

The NHA emphasises that decisions must be guided by data and evidence rather than anecdotal or observational claims. Policy changes directly affect owners, trainers, and Racing Operators, and the Handicappers' mandate remains clear: to, by handicapping, distribute the stakes pot as equitably as possible. Experiments such as the Assessment Plate have demonstrated that when equitable distribution is compromised, domination by a small group of participants becomes inevitable.

Governance and Oversight

Any proposed changes to the current Handicapping system – whether through policy amendments, new guidelines, and / or protocols – will require approval from the National Board of the NHA. The Handicappers will abstain from the Workshop for reasons that include the avoidance of becoming persuasive to the attendees, given that all evidence suggests that the current system and its application is statistically (shown below) functioning as intended and designed.

Accountability and Responsibility

Should SANTA's proposed Handicapping changes be implemented, the Handicapping Team reserves the right to be absolved of responsibility for any resulting statistical distortions or long-term impacts. Moreover, the Merit Rating hierarchy in Pattern races risks being undermined, as eliminations currently determined by objective merit may no longer align with the revised framework. Such inconsistencies could generate disputes among stakeholders - issues that should not fall within the Handicappers' purview.

Current Technical Considerations:

The Handicapping Team believes that the current system is functioning exactly as designed. Key indicators of this efficacy include, but are not limited to, the following as per the data below:

- **Increased Participation:** Higher acceptance rates in Handicaps and Merit Rating-based races.
- **Elimination Data:** High demand for entry in premier events such as the Hollywoodbets Durban July, Golden Horse Casino Sprint, Betway Summer Cup and the Chairty Mile confirm the system's integrity at the pattern level.
- **Program Stability:** Programmers frequently rely on Handicap formats to ensure adequate field sizes.
- **Open Betting Market:** These races consistently produce closer finishes and a more robust betting market, which ultimately extends the racing careers of the horse population.
- **Competitive Density:** Data indicates that the average beaten finisher in a Handicap is 3.5 lengths behind the winner, compared to 4.8 lengths in non-handicap races. This suggests the system is achieving its primary goal of narrowing the gap between competitors.
- **Systemic Balance:** The National Merit Ratings Update continues to ensure a balanced distribution of ratings across all age groups, preventing structural bias within the population – any skewing of the table below will result in programming difficulties.
- **Merit Rating Appeals:** Since the cancellation of the previous guidelines in 2019, Handicappers have assessed approximately 188,500 performances. Remarkably, during this entire review period, only 14 appeals were lodged of which 11 were dismissed.

Pre August 2019			Oct-25		Current	
Rating Bands	Count	Population %	Count	Population %	Count	Population %
104+	132	2%	377	6%	379	6%
99 TO 103	93	1%	148	2%	178	3%
94 TO 98	150	2%	250	4%	245	4%
89 TO 93	204	3%	317	5%	275	4%
84 TO 88	300	5%	414	7%	433	7%
79 TO 83	388	6%	613	10%	638	10%
74 TO 78	528	8%	673	11%	700	11%
69 TO 73	603	10%	660	10%	697	11%
64 TO 68	678	11%	598	9%	621	10%
59 TO 63	715	11%	519	8%	530	8%
54 TO 58	625	10%	432	7%	417	7%
49 TO 53	567	9%	329	5%	323	5%
44 TO 48	410	7%	158	2%	142	2%
39 TO 43	223	4%	67	1%	63	1%
34 TO 38	117	2%	41	1%	34	1%
29 TO 33	54	1%	29	0%	28	0%
24 TO 28	31	0%	23	0%	25	0%
0 TO 23	466	7%	690	11%	599	9%
<i>Sample Size = 6284</i>			<i>Sample Size = 6338</i>		<i>Sample Size = 6327</i>	
	74 and higher	27%	74 and higher	45%	74 and higher	45%
	73 and lower	72%	73 and lower	54%	73 and lower	54%

The sample sizes above were not calculated over a single racing season; instead, approximately one and a half seasons of data were used for each sample. This broader dataset provides a larger sample size, which is advantageous because it reduces random variation and increases the reliability of the results.

While these outcomes align with current regulatory objectives, we acknowledge that some SANTA members may desire a different philosophical approach - specifically one that allows certain horses to progress through the ranks with greater ease while accumulating more wins. Currently, the Handicappers operate on the principle of equalising opportunity for all participants. To move forward, SANTA must establish clear guidelines that deliver fair outcomes for stakeholders. Without such direction, Handicappers will be obliged to continue applying the system strictly in accordance with the existing Rules.

Our data confirms that the current ratings spread is optimal for a balanced racing program. We must caution that any artificial skewing of this spread could severely compromise the rating pyramid and negatively impact the race program, particularly given the constraints of our current horse population. Furthermore, while the goal of handicapping is to distribute wins equitably, a perfect mathematical balance is unattainable given the ratio of horses to available races.

The table below highlights the impact of handicaps, where Handicappers aim to distribute wins more equitably. However, the current top five trainers in South Africa consistently achieve significantly better results in non-handicap races compared to handicap races. Crucially, any adjustment to the existing handicapping system would disproportionately benefit trainers with access to higher-quality horses. Given the limited number of handicap races available, such changes could severely disadvantage trainers outside the top ten on the trainers’ log, creating an uneven playing field and undermining competitive balance.

Top 5 Trainers	
Handicap Runs	973
Handicap Wins	133
Handicap Strike Rate	13.6%
Non-Handicap Runs	1 637
Non-Handicap Wins	263
Non-Handicap S/Rate	15.3%

Below are some Statistical Breakdowns and Challenges the system faces:

1. Statistical Overview – Current Season 1 August 2025 to 30 March 2026

Total Races (Handicaps)	746
Total Runs	7 153
Individual Horses	2 111

		Wins	Strike Rate
3-year-olds - runs	1 448	193	13%
4-year-olds - runs	2 431	266	11%
5-year-olds - runs	1 876	189	10%
6-year-olds and older - runs	1 398	98	7%

The table provides statistical evidence that Handicappers do not disadvantage three-year-olds as a group. Any claims to the contrary are unsupported by the data and represent a distortive narrative rather than fact.

2. Mathematical Constraints

- **Finite Race Opportunities**

- With **746 Handicap races** and **2111 horses**, the ratio is heavily skewed.
- If each race produces only one unique winner, meaning **1365 horses** cannot possibly win in the season, leaving many horses as 1-time winners. Therein lies the dilemma; there is NO system that will cater for the 1365 horses winning.
- Given the system's built-in constraints, no rational observer could reasonably assign blame to the Handicappers for the prevalence of one-time winners or horses that struggle to win another race. The racing fixtures and number of races have reduced drastically from 450 fixtures and 4800 races at peak to the current 340 fixtures and 2950 races, with a current horse population of just under 5000.
- This demonstrates the mathematical impossibility of ensuring universal competitiveness when "competitive" is often defined by winning only.

- **Owner/Trainer Expectations**

- Owners and trainers often equate competitiveness with victory, but the numbers show that most horses will inevitably fail to win irrespective of the competency level of the Handicappers or the Handicapping system.
- Handicappers are therefore judged against an unrealistic benchmark.

3. Programming Challenges – Introduction and Programming of Banded Ratings races

- **Reduction of Handicap Races**

- The introduction of Pinnacles, Middle, B Stakes, and C Stakes has reduced the number of true handicaps.
- These races are Merit Rating-based, not handicaps, and they favour horses at the top of each rating band.
- This creates a structural bias: many horses enter races where they have little chance of success.

- **Weight Terms and Ratings**

- Horses that are badly-in at the weights (Pinnacles...etc) often run to their ratings but fail to earn due to weight disadvantages.
- Handicappers cannot provide significant relief without undermining the credibility of the ratings system, which is compounded by Merit Rating restrictions imposed in these Banded Ratings races.
- This results in a cycle where winning horses continue to win, while others are relegated to “field fillers.”

4. Strategic Implications

- **Handicappers’ Dilemma**

- They must balance fairness with mathematical impossibility.
- The system ensures that many horses will never win, regardless of adjustments.

- **Programming Bias**

- The reduction in handicap races and reliance on Banded Ratings has skewed competitiveness toward higher rated horses.
- This situation undermines Rule 47.3.2, which explicitly defines a handicap as “*a race in which the weights to be carried by the horses are allocated by the handicapper for the purpose of equalising their chances of winning.*”

Given this misalignment, it raises the question of whether the rule should be amended or removed to ensure consistency with current practice.

5. Summary

- The statistics confirm that 3-year-olds dominate handicaps due to WFA allowances and natural progression.
- Older horses face diminishing strike rates, reflecting both biological and structural disadvantages.
- The imbalance between race opportunities and horse numbers ensures that many horses will never win, regardless of handicapping.
- Programming decisions (e.g., Pinnacles, Stakes races) further reduce handicap opportunities, skewing competitiveness toward higher-rated horses.
- Handicapping cannot guarantee universal success; it can only aim to balance opportunities within the constraints of race programming and horse populations.

The "Assessment Plate" Warning: The Risk of Uniformed Decisions:

We do not need to guess what happens when entry conditions are manipulated to aid specific classes of horses; we have the failure of the **Assessment Plate** initiative as proof. Intended to help graduate horses, it instead entrenches the advantages of a select elite while devastating the betting market. The original idea put forward for Assessment Plates was to allow the Handicappers more time in assessing horses which break their Maidens within five starts.

Statistics:

- **Decimated Field Sizes:** Assessment Plates produced an average field size of just **7.87 runners** (frequently dropping to 3 – 5 runners), compared to the **11.6 average** in MR handicaps.
- **Elite Monopolisation:** Two Trainers – who represent just 4% of the trainer base – accounted for **21% of all runners** and won **17.54%** of these races. One race card saw 62.5% of the field drawn from just these two yards.

As racing analyst, the late Mr Jay August noted:

“These races served a very narrow interest base while offering zero uplift to betting turnover. Punters do not wager on predictable, tiny fields.”

He further states:

“The Handicappers I believe have it right and, on this evidence, there is no real need, on average, to assess these ratings beyond what has already been seen, and which could not possibly be seen in any other race. If the Handicapper’s assessment of the highly rated horse ex their maiden win was wrong (too high), then the stats should show that. They do not, which leads me to believe that Assessment Plates have little to do with assessment but more to do with helping superior animals to win a few races before their ability is penalised too much.”

Assessment Plates (August 1, 2018 - March 19, 2019)								
MR Rank	AveRtg	Runs	Wins	Win%	EW%	IV	Odds%	AdjIV
1	92.15	62	27	43.55%	14.35%	3.03	35.96%	1.21
2	85.81	63	16	25.40%	13.99%	1.81	23.46%	1.08
3	80.90	51	5	9.80%	14.34%	0.68	16.28%	0.60
4	78.02	65	5	7.69%	13.86%	0.55	11.68%	0.66
5	70.67	49	2	4.08%	14.25%	0.29	9.62%	0.42
6	69.77	56	1	1.79%	12.76%	0.14	6.64%	0.27
7	63.97	35	0	0.00%	12.45%	0.00	4.33%	0.00
8	62.89	27	2	7.41%	10.98%	0.67	3.99%	1.86
9	60.80	15	0	0.00%	10.26%	0.00	2.80%	0.00
10	59.75	8	0	0.00%	9.89%	0.00	2.48%	0.00
11	57.50	2	0	0.00%	9.09%	0.00	1.73%	0.00
MR Rank = Ranking of MR in each race								
AveRtg = Average MR Rating for x ranked horses								
EW% = The % expectation that a horse should win if all horses had an equal chance								
IV (Impact Value) = Actual Wins% divided by EW% (1= average, 2 = double expectation etc)								
Odds% - The expectation of winning implied by the SP								
AdjIV - Actual wins divided by Odds% (above 1 is profitable and vice versa)								

See link below for full article:

<https://www.sportingpost.co.za/phumelela-assessment-plates/>

Be aware of False Narratives:

It is essential to reject false and unsubstantiated claims that Handicappers are “getting it wrong.” Such assertions are based purely on opinion and ignore the factual evidence presented in this press release. Using a single horse’s, often explainable poor performance, as supposed proof of alleged incompetence - while disregarding the overwhelming data above - often misrepresents reality and assumes horses always run to form, which is demonstrably untrue.

The facts speak for themselves: over the past long weekend, the top-rated and second highest-rated horses in non-handicap races delivered multiple winners and second-place finishers, underscoring a functioning Handicapping system.

See below:

Fairview 3 April:

Bad Medicine 2nd best rated and **won**

Greyville 3 April:

Master Du Rouvray 2nd best rated **won**

Sesame rated to win ran 2nd

Chasing Gold rated to run 2nd and **won**

Turffontein 4 April:

One Of Those Days rated to win and **won**

Double Grand Slam rated to win easily and **won** (Grade 1) accordingly

Buffalo Storm Cody rated to win and **won** (Grade 1)

See It Again rated to win and **won** (Grade 1)

Curious Girl (ran to a rating of 100 in the Oaks Trial but Merit Rating adjustment was restricted) **won** (Grade 2)

Scottsville 5 April:

Lilting Song jointly rated to win and **won**

Royal Invitation rated to win and **won**

Plum Pudding rated to run 2nd – Exacta!

Kenilworth 6 April:

Symphony In White rated to win and **won**

SA Pattern Status:

It is important to note that South African Horseracing falls under Part 1 of the International Cataloguing Standards Blue Book. This places us in the highest tier or the 'Premier League' of world racing. Consequently, the NHA is tasked with ensuring quality control, oversight, and integrity as the representative for South Africa in the Asian Racing Federation.

Conclusion:

The Handicappers, in the execution of their duties, adopt a stakeholder-inclusive approach in which the needs, interests, and expectations of all stakeholders are considered to ensure the sustainability of the industry.

We urge that the outcome of any amendments be founded on the following criteria:

- Thorough contextual understanding;
- Clear reasoning and transparency; and
- Accountability coupled with objectivity and rigorous risk assessment.

The Handicapping Team

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