

# RACING POST



## On-course bookmakers and Towcester sign deal

By Howard Wright 4.42PM 26 OCT 2009

TOWCESTER has agreed a long-term deal with its on-course bookmakers, in a move that signals the first breakthrough in a saga concerning list positions that has been running since March 2007.

While other racecourses, either as groups or individually, remain in discussions, or on the sidelines over the controversial issue of on-track pitches, Towcester has concluded negotiations with its regular bookmakers in conjunction with the Federation of Racecourse Bookmakers.

Starting from the next meeting, on Thursday, November 5, all on-track bookmakers will pay a daily access fee of £80 (from £50); list positions will remain with individual bookmakers for the lifetime of the racecourse, and sales or transfers of list positions will incur a six per cent commission payment to Towcester.

A procedure has also been put in place to settle disputes. If issues cannot be resolved by a committee comprising racecourse and bookmaker representatives, independent arbitration will be used.

The arrangement replaces the current system of charging bookmakers five times the admission price for the enclosure in which they bet, which is due to be revoked throughout Britain in 2012.

Since Towcester went entry-free, except for four meetings a year, bookmakers have paid £50 for entry. The new charge of £80 will go up to £100 in 2017, under an agreed review.

Other elements of the deal, which will be signed by bookmakers following Tuesday's confirmation, have been framed to take care of outstanding issues, such as duration of tenure, new betting areas and dispute resolution, which have been raised by the bookmakers since March 2007.

At that time, the Racecourse Association announced that British tracks would cease to recognise list positions, which determine the order in which bookmakers choose where to bet, from 2012.

On-course bookmaking organisations argued that, after racecourse pitch arrangements were reorganised in 1998, members had bought and sold list positions in the belief they were held in perpetuity.

For two and a half years the controversy has rumbled on, despite the intervention of individual MPs, select committee inquiries, the efforts of a working group chaired by Sholto Douglas-Home and discussions between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the RCA and bookmakers.

Towcester, the only British track that is not a member of the RCA, has now provided a breakthrough, which the bookmakers' organisation said could act as "a catalyst for an eventual agreement between the RCA and the FRB."

Towcester owner and chairman Lord Hesketh revealed that the deal would immediately sink £15,000 a year into the course's profit.

He said: "Bookmakers are very important for our business, and this deal is all about improving our crowds, which we have increased significantly since we introduced free entry.

"Free racing generates bigger crowds, which bring in more bookmakers, and that creates a buzz in the ring. You've got to have some glamour on a racecourse, and protecting the ring is part of that. Atmosphere is crucial."

Hesketh pointed out that Towcester has a higher average number of bookmakers – around 22 – than most courses of similar size – because it provides them with better margins.

He explained: "More favourites are beaten at Towcester than anywhere else, because of our killer hill up the straight. We didn't sit round a table with a set of dice when we decided on the terms of the agreement; we took everything into account."