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Horse Racing: HRA reveals major fall in racecourse fatalities for 2005

Published: 10/11/2006 (Sport) By Howard Wright

ON-TRACK fatalities were significantly down in 2005, partly due to improvements implemented by the racecourses, with the overall rate dropping below two deaths per 1,000 runners.

Better collection and interpretation of statistics for racecourse injuries, allied to the willingness of racecourses to implement improvements, contributed to the decrease, according to Horseracing Regulatory Authority veterinary officer Anthony Stirk.

Revealing figures for 2005 at yesterday's annual industry conference at Cheltenham, Stirk pointed out that the overall fatalities for the year were 1.88 per 1,000 runners across all race types, compared with the six-year average of 2.19 since 2000, when the then Jockey Club racecourse department first recorded detailed statistics on computer.

Stirk said: "That's significantly the lowest fatality rate over the period, and the first time it has dropped below two runners per 1,000.

"There are considerable year-on-year variations, which should warn us against any complacency but things are definitely getting better.

"The total number of runners has gone up by 20 per cent over the six years, and logically you might expect a similar increase in the rate of fatalities, but it hasn't happened."

Stirk also noted that the incidence of fatalities on all-weather surfaces, which has been consistently slightly higher than in turf races, had dropped in 2005 and was showing a similar trend this year.

He said: "I'm sure this can be attributed to the increased employment of second-generation, waxed and oil-based surfaces."

Stirk's first love, jump racing, which he said had brought him into Jockey Club employment in 1997 after 30 years of private practice, was also showing significant signs of welfare improvement, he said.

The fatality rates for hurdle races and chases were now much closer than might be imagined, he pointed out, and those for chases alone were 3.66 per 1,000 runners in 2005, compared with a six-year average of 5.94.

In bumpers the peak of 4.63 fatalities per 1,000 runners in 2003 dropped to 1.69 last year, which Stirk said could be partly attributed to the introduction of 'junior' bumper races over shorter distances.

The statistics are recorded by veterinary officers at every meeting and collated under a special software programme to produce a database for detailed analysis.

Delving deeper into the significance of the statistics has enabled HRA officials to work with racecourses on improvements in areas such as ground maintenance and the placing of obstacles, Stirk said, for the sake of the safety of horse and rider.

He added: "Changes in conditions and policy can be recommended to the industry with some confidence in the likely results, and the system also helps to provide prompt and accurate responses for general or specific queries from within or outside the industry."

The significance of yesterday's venue, where ten horses died either during or as a result of injuries sustained at this year's festival meeting, was not lost on HRA chief executive Peter Web-bon, who chaired the seminar.

However, he said: "The investigation showed there was no single factor behind the fatalities, and although they stand out in 2006, the evidence suggests they will not affect the general trend we've seen over the

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