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COLUMN

Grand National has been rescued from the jaws of death once again

IN THE aftermath of the 2011 Grand National, during which two racehorses died, there was a pervasive atmosphere of grief and chaos at Aintree. The race had been nothing short of a disaster for racing.

BBC cameras had shown scenes of quiet horror: first, the tarpaulin-draped body of Orna's left untended in the middle of the course, and then, worse, from a high camera that hid little, the field sweeping round Becher's Brook while behind green screens Dooneys Gate lay dead.

The next year went no better as the deaths of According To Pete and Gold Cup winner Synchronised overshadowed the closest finish in the race's history.

Behind the scenes, even veteran racing journalists, many of whom have constitutions to withstand rather more than the ordinary mortal, were deeply shaken. Questions about the future of the race, even jump racing as a sport, swirled in a febrile post-race environment.

Such events seemed like a lifetime ago in the heady elation of last Saturday's race. As the sun beat down on Aintree all seemed well with the world: there had been a spirited and game winner of the race in One For Arthur; his trainer, Lucinda Russell, was infectiously overjoyed; all runners and riders had returned safely.

From grief to joy in just five years. In those moments after the race, as the One For Arthur camp celebrated in the sun and the news that all 80 had returned unscathed filtered through, it seemed the National had decisively turned a corner.

As I wrote in Saturday's race report, the new National, with its safer fences and relentless focus on horse welfare, has become an event fit to be treasured by a modern audience.

Whether the National will be treasured by a modern audience is another question – fatalities or not, the danger and unpredictability of the National alone is too much for some – but the work done to safeguard the grand old race deserves to be fully acknowledged.

Without it, it is no exaggeration to say the National might already be playing its last post.

Following what one newspaper described, not entirely unfairly, as a "day of horror" in 2011, the sport commissioned a review of the race and seven months later 30 recommendations to improve safety and welfare at Aintree were produced. These changes covered everything from restrictions on which horses and jockeys could participate, a streamlining of preliminaries and numerous changes to fences.

Further modifications, particularly to the start and fences, were



One For Arthur and Lucinda Russell after another successful National

announced in 2012 after the deaths of Synchronised and According To Pete. Some of the changes attracted controversy, including from those who felt the National wouldn't be the National if the levels of difficulty were dialled down.

Five Nationals have now taken place since then and we have the time and space to reflect upon what these changes have achieved. The transformation has been remarkable.

Most obviously, there have been five consecutive Nationals without fatalities, the first time that has been achieved in at least 50 years. By contrast, there were six deaths in the five-year period before 2013.

The number of fallers has also diminished markedly. From 2000 until 2011, the BHA's review group found the average faller rate in the National was an astonishing 28 per cent.

In 2012, 11 of the 40 starters, including Gold Cup winner Synchronised, fell. But following the additional changes made that year, the faller rate has now more than halved to just 13 per cent.

They say one swallow doesn't make a summer but we now have five of them and it appears as if the work done to safeguard the Grand National has been a massive success.

That is a great credit to those who worked on the review: from the BHA Jamie Stier, who chaired the group; inspectors of courses Richard Linley and Chris Dennis; former head of

racecourse Fraser Garrity; former director of equine science and welfare Tim Morris; racecourse licensing executive Rob Hartley; and, from Aintree, clerk of the course Andrew Tulloch. Their farsighted and thorough review may have saved the race from an excruciating death.

The Grand National jockeys also deserve credit. After the PR disasters of 2011 and 2012, they have embraced their own responsibility for ensuring the race survives.

At their annual pre-National briefing in 2013 Mick Fitzgerald spoke to the riders, noting the horrific coverage the race had received in the preceding two years, and explained it was down to each and every one of them to do what they could to avoid a repeat.

Jockeys have stepped up to the plate, pulling up tired horses (the rate of pulled-up runners has gone from 17 per cent from 2000 to 2011 to 28 per cent over the last five years) and attempting to keep a lid on their and their charge's enthusiasm.

Cyril Stein, the Ladbroke's boss, is credited with saving the National when he stepped in to save Aintree from the developers in 1975. The race faced a very different enemy in 2012, but the rescue mission undertaken by the jockeys, administrators and officials was no less urgently needed and the threat to the race no less stark.

The sport owes all who saved it a second time a debt of thanks.

Racing's TV ratings would drop further with Sky

TV RATINGS for the National, and ITV more generally, have been much discussed lately. Some, including a few connected to Channel 4, feel ITV is getting an easier ride than it did in the face of declining audience numbers.

Yet from this quarter at least there was no blame attached to Channel 4 for losing viewers after the move from the BBC – the blame for that was entirely laid at the door of those who in their wisdom decided to move racing there in the first place.

I was far from the only pundit who warned it was inevitable that moving racing from BBC1, the nation's most popular channel, to C4 was going to cost the sport viewers.

Likewise, during the last negotiation, I warned that moving the majority of fixtures from Channel 4, the nation's second-biggest commercial channel, to ITV4, deep down dark in the Freeview TV guide, was going to cost viewers.

The only surprise about the figures revealed in yesterday's Racing Post special report was that the move has not cost the sport more viewers than it has, which may well be testament to the quality of ITV's coverage so far.

ITV did increase viewers at Cheltenham and will be confident of doing similar at Royal Ascot and other big Flat dates. Despite that, it is almost certain to suffer a net loss against Channel 4 over the course of the year. The responsibility for that no more lies at Ed Chamberlin's door than responsibility for Channel 4's audiences rested at Nick Luck's.

Declining viewing figures are primarily down to a combination of channel profile and changing viewing habits (streaming is already big and is growing rapidly).

With Channel 4 and the BBC unlikely to return to the negotiating table next time around, it seems probable the main competition for ITV, if it desires to retain the rights in 2021, will be Sky, whose enthusiasm for the sport was extensively covered in this space by my colleague Lee Mottershead recently.

A move to the subscriber channel would guarantee racing sheds another great chunk of its audience. Sky does not release detailed subscriber numbers, but last year its

most watched football match attracted an average audience of 1.97m.

To put the relative pull of the two sports in context, racing receives £7.5 million per year from ITV – the Premier League gets more than £10 million per game.

Not only would racing attract a fraction of its current audience on Sky, it would also be invisible to the majority of people in Britain who do not have a satellite subscription. From there it is not hard to envisage coverage disappearing from newspapers and mainstream news and the sport's retreat into obscurity.

That will never happen, though – will it? You would hope not but, given that racing's rights negotiators, headed up by Racecourse Media Group chief executive Richard FitzGerald, have in two successive negotiations skillfully managed to secure a deal to diminish racing's total audience, those wishing to continue watching racing next decade might best begin looking at Sky packages.

It has been a bonny week for Scotland

IT HAS been a good week for Scottish racing. Not only did One For Arthur bring the National north of the border for the first time since 1979, the fine work of the nation's five racecourses was highlighted on Monday when Kelso sported more prize-money than Redcar or (the much-criticised) Windsor, the other two British fixtures, despite having a race fewer.

Tomorrow, Musselburgh will kick off the Scottish Flat season with its Easter Saturday race meeting, which has £200,000 prize-money on offer, including £100,000 in the new Queen's Cup Handicap over 1m6f, which canny course chief Bill Farnsworth hopes will be come established as one of British racing's top staying handicaps.

Racegoers at Musselburgh will also have the pleasure of seeing National hero One For Arthur parade and his groom, Jaimie Duff, receive her trophy for last Saturday's win.

Duff remained with One For Arthur during the cooling down process, meaning she missed the National presentations. Duff deserves a rapturous reception for her devotion.