

Big improvement in sectional timing on the way

by Andrew Scutts

A REVOLUTIONARY system that can pinpoint to the yard exactly how far every horse has run in every race is about to be launched in Britain - in a development that could bring racing in this country out of the dark ages as regards sectional timing and turnus into world leaders.

The company that has pioneered the system, known as speed sensing, says it will be introduced by the end of the year. It is believed that Newmarket could be the first course to benefit - starting on Saturday if trials go well.

Hailed by its pioneers at Turftrax, who introduced the GoingStick mechanism, as "the next generation" of sectional timing, speed sensing has been on trial since last autumn.

The system works via transmitters embedded in saddle-cloths that send out radio signals to fixed-point receivers placed all around the racecourse.

From these signals, it is possible to create an accurate, virtual representation of the race in real time, and collect definitive sectional time information.

The position of each horse can be tracked throughout the race, plus his speed and the exact distance he travels. Standard sectionals can be taken via speed sensing, but the system's raison d'etre is to take time-clocking in Britain to a more advanced level than is currently the case in other major racing countries, including the United States, Hong Kong and Australia.

"Our system can give standard sectional-time information, but it's an add-on, in that it can track real-time speed and the positions of horses throughout the race," says Ian Harvey of Turftrax.

"There are far more variables - including the distance every horse travels in each race - and is therefore more useful.

"It's the next generation. What we're trying to develop can deliver sectional times, but we have far wider ambitions. No other racing jurisdiction in the world can match speed sensing. It's cutting-edge technology because it's a mobile system which can operate across a range of courses."

Newmarket has been at the forefront of speed sensing trials, while Doncaster, Newbury, York, Haydock, Cheltenham and Southwell are also among the tracks to have worked with Turftrax.

The company admits the data is less relevant and useful to punters over jumps than on the Flat - particularly the all-weather - but that does not deter it from seeking blanket coverage.

The aim is to deploy speed sensing at all 59 of Britain's

racecourses, but that is more "in the fullness of time" than the immediate future.

Harvey says: "Some courses do present certain challenges, but we've yet to find a track we couldn't configure our system on. Cheltenham wasn't easy but we dealt with it.

"The intention is to cover, in the fullness of time, all UK racing. That is the ambition, but we're looking at a progressive roll out. We can't deliver 59 courses on day one. We'll be going live sooner rather than later, and speed sensing will be a reality later this year."

However, before fans of sectional timing start celebrating the news, it's probably wise to remember there have been false dawns before.

In the late 1980s, Scottish-based clerk of the course David McHarg first experimented with sectional timing, but it remained just that, while Wolverhampton's six-month trial in 1999 also led to nothing permanent. In addition, while Turftrax are confident they will go live in 2004, they admit that sectional timing will be available initially at only a few of Britain's 59 tracks.

Blanket coverage, the ultimate aim, is years away. Indeed, it's by no means certain that sectional timing will ever extend to all 59 tracks, which would jeopardise meaningful comparisons.

The fact that Britain does not have a sectional timing system, unlike the majority of major horseracing countries, not to mention Aidan O'Brien, who installed one on his gallops a few years ago, remains a source of frustration for many in the industry.

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