

Hold your horses on whip rule



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LESS than 10 days after the new whip rules were bulldozed on to the racing landscape, Hall Of Fame trainer Lee Freedman warned they would ignite emotion rarely seen before.

Freedman is, as usual, on the money, but not even he could have foreseen the drama, angst and unrest the whip rules have inflamed. Already we've seen jockeys, for one of the few times in the past 50 years, take industrial action - and more is threatened. Melbourne's world-famous spring carnival, already bubbling away underneath the AFL radar, could face unprecedented interruption. Infuriatingly, all this could be easily remedied.

No one, not even the most belligerent jockey, argues against the need to move in line with 21st-century thinking. Jockeys have no issue with the introduction of the padded

whip. Instead of gauging the success of the padded whip over, say, a year, the Australian Racing Board went for one too many cracks of the whip.

As well as making padded whips compulsory from August 1, the ARB introduced more cumbersome rules and regulations. Some centred on a jockey not raising the whip above his/her shoulder; others focused on not using the whip five times before the last 200m.

Jockeys are more than happy to embrace those initiatives, but it's rules regarding the use of the whip over the final 200m - the business end of a race - that are plainly unworkable. It's at this crucial stage a race can be won or lost. At this pivotal point a jockey's discretion in how he or she rides the horse can't and shouldn't be impaired.

But the rules that allow a jockey to use the whip only in three consecutive strides, and then every second stride thereafter, impinges on jockeys carrying out their work to the best of their ability.

Rhythm and momentum are everything at the finish of a race. Jockeys are now being put out of whack because of a rule that demands they count how many times they use a tool of trade. Does an architect tell a carpenter how to hit a nail?

And, make no mistake, a whip is a tool of a jockey's trade. It's not used to inflict pain -- not that a padded whip does -- but to guide, steer, straighten and encourage a horse to produce its best. Jockeys, with the support of the other key stakeholders - trainers, owners and breeders - have requested a compromise, albeit small.

They've asked the ARB to amend the rules to allow discretionary use of the whip in the final 100m so they can perform their job unimpeded.

Trainers, owners, breeders, punters, even once-a-year Cup flutterers, want their horse to be given every chance to obtain the best possible placing.

Remarkably, one of the main premises behind the ARB's push for the new whip rules was to improve the image of racing. What the rule has in effect done is cause a greater perception problem. And that spans from horse owner to the punter in pubs and clubs and watching TV sets around the country.

Post mortems are now prefaced by questions of "what if" he or she had been able to use the whip one more time. Jockeys have every right to feel aggrieved; they've been handcuffed. The holder of the keys - the ARB - doesn't seem willing to unlock the handcuffs. And that could well hold the key to the success of Melbourne's spring carnival.