# The Grand National: Balancing tradition and safety at Aintree



The Grand National, a hallmark of British horse racing, is set to capture the attention of millions once again as its 177th running occurs at Aintree on Saturday. Ahead of this iconic event, statistics reveal that approximately one-third of adults in the UK are anticipated to place bets, contributing to a staggering £150 million in total wagers. Additionally, around six million viewers are expected to tune in to witness the traditional steeplechase, renowned for its challenging fences and thrilling atmosphere.

However, the excitement surrounding the Grand National is accompanied by an evolving discourse on safety and race integrity. In recent years, race organisers have grappled with the balance between ensuring safety and maintaining the race's traditional character. This debate intensified following last year's race, which resulted in no fallers and no fatalities, alongside the highest number of finishers since 2005. Critics, including contributors from Timeform, have voiced concerns that safety measures have stripped the race of its "fiendish difficulty" and "magic." A Timeform writer noted, “The old ‘Wooden National’ was primarily a test of jumping. That is no longer the case. The ‘Plastic National’ is only slightly different to other top marathon chases.”

Despite such criticisms, officials have defended the changes. Dickon White, representing the Jockey Club, stated, “I have friends who have been in the sport for 50 years, who say that it has lost its character, and is not what it was. And while I respect their opinion, I thought last year was a fantastic spectacle, with so many horses in contention until the final fence.” He added that the race has always evolved, emphasising its historical variations over the decades since its inception in 1839.

Amendments over the years have included modifications to the fences and a reduction in field sizes from 40 to 34 horses, aiming to sustain excitement while enhancing safety. Amidst this backdrop, the race's popularity, though not as high as during its peak in the late 1990s, remains robust. Newspapers such as The Sun report a significant boost in sales during major racing events, with bookmakers like Coral projecting the Grand National to generate six times the turnover of the next largest betting race, the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

Simon Claire from Coral remarked on the unique appeal of the race, stating, “We track all the figures so we know that... a third of the adult population will have a bet, or have someone place one for them.” This indicates its status as an enduring element of British culture, appealing even to those who only engage with horse racing once a year.

In a bid to further enhance safety, the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) has initiated trials involving artificial intelligence. According to Brant Dunshea, the acting chief executive of the BHA, the organisation is employing an app named Sleip to monitor horses’ gaits over time, which could aid in identifying potential health concerns before they impact performance. Furthermore, all horses participating at Aintree will undergo pre-race examinations as part of this initiative.

Dunshea also highlighted the BHA's exploration of wearable technology to track crucial metrics such as heart rate and stride length, contributing to a comprehensive approach to injury prevention. White reassured stakeholders that the Jockey Club is committed to ongoing evaluation and potential changes to the race structure, prioritising the safety and integrity of the Grand National.

As the countdown to the race continues, with the starter's flag set to drop at 4pm on Saturday, most spectators will be focused on the spectacle and their prospects of winning amid the excitement, leaving the intricate discussions on safety and tradition to be pondered after the final horse crosses the finish line.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)