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A clean new start for Hongkong racing 24-9

THE last racing season began under a lowering sky and torrential rain. It could not have been a more apt start to what was to turn into the worst year in the history of Hongkong racing. The Royal Observatory predicts brighter weather today to greet the start of the 1986-87 calendar and the Royal Hongkong Jockey Club is determined that there will be no repetition of the racing malpractices which have done so much harm to this territory's international reputation.

Many people have worked hard to convince the world that there is more to Hongkong than cheap toys and corrupt policemen, the image that prevailed until a few years ago. Their largely successful efforts received a setback in February when allegations of corruption in the racing world erupted into the public awareness. The Jockey Club understands there can be no repetition of the apparently widespread fixing that was going on, and has taken determined steps to prevent it.

The scandal is likely to have had a cathartic effect, bringing about a much-needed increase in vigilance on the part of those charged with overseeing racing, and stimulating owners in particular to face more fully their own responsibility to ensure the betting public is not cheated, and can enjoy a truly competitive sport. The Jockey Club has a new man at the helm this season, possibly the most crucial year in the club's history. Major-General Guy Watkins, the new Chief Executive who has made a favourable first impression on the racing community, will shoulder much of the challenge of making sure that Hongkong races are so clean they sparkle in the eyes of a watching world.

The contribution that racing makes to Hongkong cannot be under-estimated. Of the \$21.2 billion taken in bets last season, \$17.4

billion, or 82 per cent, went straight back into the economy as punters' winnings. On top of that was the \$2.2 billion which the Government collected in taxes, and the \$470 million donated to charity. The figures are impressive, but it is impossible to quantify the simple pleasure that race followers derive.

More than 30,000 people are entertained at the club's two tracks every race day, as well as the countless thousands who prefer to watch proceedings at home on television, or simply listen to them on radio. There are people who will always condemn gambling on moral grounds, but the fact is that for the bulk of Hongkong's population, a flutter on the horses is an important recreational outlet and an avenue of hope. Factory workers who see life stretching ahead of them with little hope of an improvement in their circumstances feel that all is not lost if there continues to be the prospect of a substantial win at Happy Valley or Sha Tin.

They deserve the best chance possible of seeing their dreams come true, and that can best be provided by clean racing. The punter's task of assessing a horse's form, track conditions, its rider's and trainer's abilities, is difficult enough without taking into account the possibility that the jockey may be more interested in seeing the horse come last rather than first.

The Jockey Club is determined the punters - and Hongkong as a whole - will have racing they can be proud of. The hottest tip the *South China Morning Post* can offer at the start of this new season is that once the dust has settled and public confidence in the conduct of racing is restored, the sport will continue to go from strength to strength. The shake-out demanded by last season's scandals was probably overdue and the racing world will be all the better for it.