The Run-In
More Power at the Elbow

Walking the Grand National of Innovation

Reflections from The Innovators Racecourse

The Grand National is often remembered for its famous fences.

Becher's Brook.
The Canal Turn.
The Chair.
Foinavon.

But after the final fence has been cleared, another challenge still remains.

The long run-in to the finish.

Nearly five hundred yards after thirty demanding fences, exhausted horses and riders must still find enough rhythm, balance and endurance to complete the race.

It is the longest run-in in jump racing. And within this final stretch sits one of the most famous landmarks in racing commentary.

The Elbow.

A slight inward kink in the course where jockeys often commit to their final effort toward the line.

The commentators famous line is "The runners have reached the elbow in the national."

The Elbow itself is not the obstacle.

The run-in is the test.

Within The Innovators Racecourse, the fences and course are not simply obstacles for the innovation itself.

They also represent stages in the development of the innovator navigating increasingly complex systems of pressure, uncertainty and endurance.

Earlier fences required the innovator to:

- understand the terrain,
- position strategically,
- survive scrutiny,
- and adapt during disruption.

But the long run-in introduces something different again.

Sustained execution.

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Because many innovation journeys are not lost at the major obstacles.

They are lost during the exhausting operational run toward completion.

At this stage, the race reveals something deeply important.

The Grand National is a handicap race.

Every horse carries different weight.

The system deliberately distributes unequal burdens to create competitive balance across the field.

Innovation systems are rarely any different.

Some innovators carry:

- regulatory burden,
- organisational complexity,
- legacy infrastructure,
- technical debt,
- public scrutiny,
- investor expectation,
- scaling pressure,
- or operational fatigue.

Others carry:

- lack of access,
- limited resources,
- obscurity,
- or isolation.

Everybody carries something.

And early in the race, those burdens are not always fully visible.

- Momentum can disguise strain.
- Excitement can conceal exhaustion.
- Rapid growth can temporarily hide unsustainable load.

But eventually, the long run-in arrives.

And accumulated burden begins to reveal itself.

This is why experienced jockeys speak so carefully about pacing every stage of the race.

Many horses travel brilliantly for much of the Grand National before suddenly fading at the Elbow.

The distance and burden finally catches up with them.

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- Sometimes the horse has simply given too much too early.
- Sometimes the accumulated weight becomes impossible to sustain.
- Sometimes the race has been attacked with intensity but not with rhythm.

Innovation systems often behave in remarkably similar ways.

Many founders:

- sprint through every phase,
- operate in permanent urgency,
- scale aggressively,
- overextend operationally,
- and maintain unsustainable intensity for too long.

For a period, this can appear impressive.

The organisation may look:

- dominant,
- ambitious,
- and ahead of the field.

But late in long system journeys, exhaustion has a way of arriving all at once.
And often precisely when the finish line finally becomes visible.

One of the greatest Grand Nationals ever run captured this perfectly.

In 1973, Crisp and Red Rum entered the race as joint favourites.

But the race is not a level-weights race – It's a handicap.

Crisp carried substantially more burden across the course.
12 stone to Red Rum's 10st 5lb.
A 23lb weight advantage.

But for much of the race, Crisp appeared magnificent:

- bold,
- dominant,
- courageous,
- and far ahead of the field.

At one stage he was 30 lengths ahead of the field and at the final fence was still 15 lengths to the good.

Yet late in the run-in, the accumulated load began to reveal itself.

Red Rum, meanwhile, had preserved enough rhythm and endurance to continue pushing through the final stages.

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The result became one of the most famous finishes in racing history.

Red Rum headed Crisp with 2 strides to go.

Not because one horse lacked brilliance.

But because long races ultimately reveal the sustainability of accumulated effort.

Another famous Grand National moment reveals something even more psychologically difficult.

In 1956, Devon Loch had already cleared the final fence and appeared certain to win the race.

Then, only yards from the finish, the horse made a strange half-jump on the flat and collapsed. Spreadeagled on the turf.

The race was lost.

Nobody has ever fully agreed why it happened:

- exhaustion,
- confusion,
- expectation,
- crowd noise,
- or a mistaken perception of another obstacle

have all been suggested.

But perhaps that uncertainty is part of the lesson itself.

Because many innovation journeys fail in similarly difficult-to-explain ways near completion.

Not because:

- the strategy failed,
- the market disappeared,
- or the innovation lacked value.

But because exhaustion, pressure or accumulated strain destabilised the organisation just before the line.

Throughout The Innovator Racecourse, the deeper challenge has never simply been whether the innovation itself could survive the course.

The challenge has always been whether the innovator is continuing to develop as the system changes around them.

At the run-in, this becomes impossible to hide.

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Earlier momentum, strategic brilliance or market excitement can no longer compensate for:

- exhausted leadership,
- unsustainable rhythm,
- operational strain,
- or accumulated organisational burden.

At the last fence, experienced jockeys often make a deliberate decision.

Not to panic earlier.
Not to chase every move.
Not to exhaust the horse too soon.

They wait.

To make their move at **The Elbow**.

They preserve enough energy for the moment when the final sustained effort truly matters.
Only then do they commit fully toward the finish.

Perhaps that is why a small adaptation to an old phrase feels so appropriate here.

More power at the Elbow.

Because innovation is rarely won through technical brilliance alone.

It also requires:

- pacing,
- resilience,
- energy management,
- operational rhythm,
- and the discipline to sustain coherent movement long after the major obstacles appear behind you.

The long run-in does not suddenly decide the race.

It reveals the cumulative consequence of everything that came before:

- the preparation in the paddock,
- the understanding of the course,
- the positioning through the field,
- the burden carried,
- the rhythm preserved,
- and the countless small decisions made across the journey itself.

By the time horse and rider reach the Elbow, the finish line may finally be visible.
But the race has already been shaped by everything that came before it.

Explore more about The Art and Architecture of Scaling in "The Innovators Racecourse."

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