

Why I Joined The NTRA Safety & Integrity Alliance



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The last few weeks have been an important time in the history of Thoroughbred racing, with the announcement in New York of the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance. As both the executive chair of the NTRA and the president of Turfway Park, I often find myself viewing the Alliance from two distinctly different points of view. From the broad perspective of my role with the NTRA, I am exceedingly gratified that so many subsets of our diverse industry were able to put individual issues aside and collaborate for the good of all. These industry groups, which importantly included fans, were not just unified in their approval of the Alliance and their willingness to embrace changes that were, first and foremost, the right thing to do on behalf of our equine and human athletes. They also were instrumental in developing virtually every component and concept contained in the Alliance's 21 pages of reforms.

And that wide-ranging input will continue to be vital as the work of the Alliance evolves in the weeks and months ahead. Equally impressive was the industry's willingness to cede the important role of oversight to a fair but tough-minded outsider who would cut us no slack. Three things stuck out in my mind about our independent counsel Tommy Thompson after spending several hours with the former four-term Governor of Wisconsin and Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services last Wednesday: 1) he has a very high energy level and little tolerance for inaction; 2) he has a deep passion for Thoroughbred racing; and 3) he was not blowing smoke when he said he would have no problem giving racetracks and others a grade of "F" in his periodic public report cards if he found them insincere about their resolve to reform horse racing. As unsettling as the glare of public scrutiny may be to a track operator, it is exactly this brand of transparency that can help the Alliance succeed where other well-intentioned industry initiatives have failed. And to be sure, there are plenty of obstacles we all must hurdle on the road to successful implementation of the Alliance's reforms. Chief among them is the financial cost. It's safe to say that 2008 will not be chronicled as the "salad days" of our industry from a bottom-line standpoint.

The economy has played a big role in that. But so has our relative inaction on matters like health and safety and wagering security. We have no choice but to shore up the infrastructure of our sport to ensure that our future is brighter than our recent past.

Does the current business downturn make it more difficult for track execs like me to do this? Absolutely. But that same business slump and the pain it brings make the need to change--and change now--inescapably apparent. It's easy to overlook problems during otherwise tranquil times, and all of us have been guilty of that at one time or another. Now, problems of our own doing (lack of reform) coupled with problems not of our doing (the economy) have made it clear that the salient question is not, "How much will it cost me to implement these reforms?" The question is, "How much will it cost me today and in the longer run--NOT to implement these reforms?"

I am reading the New York *Times* bestseller "Snowball," a pretty good read about the most recognized investor on the planet, Warren Buffett. In the book, Buffett sums up his philosophy this way: "I am fearful when others are greedy, and I am greedy when others are fearful." In that vein, those who fear making investments in reform merely open the door wider for those of us who think it is not only the morally right thing to do but also ultimately the path to economic dividends. I hope the wagering public, who rightfully has demanded many of these reforms, rewards those making the investment with a greater share of their play. I trust that owners, our industry's largest lifeline of investment capital, will run their horses at facilities willing to invest in protecting those valuable assets and in conducting racing with the utmost integrity. If some view that as greedy, then I am happy to be viewed in that light.

When we made the decision to install Polytrack at Turfway Park in 2005, we faced financial costs that were staggering for a mid-sized track like ours. When I look back three years later, though, I shudder to think what things would be like for Turfway today had we not made that switch. Our racing has been safer, our field sizes have increased and our weather-related cancellations have declined. Switching to Polytrack proved to be the right decision for us back then. And I know that joining the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance is the right decision for us now.

I am pleased that 55 other racetracks see this issue as Turfway sees it and have joined the Alliance. And I'm hopeful that those who have not yet joined will soon do so. In the big picture, it doesn't really matter when a racetrack or other industry organization climbs on board--it just matters that we're all, indeed, on board. That's because Governor Thompson isn't the only one who will be grading us. Even more telling will be the grade we receive from the American public, including our fans and our prospective fans. They will be grading us individually in our local markets and collectively on a national scale. And when that report card comes, not a single one of us can afford a failing grade.