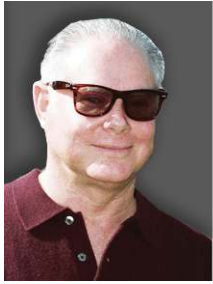


KENTUCKY SLOTS



op/ed

by barry irwin

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Bill Finley penned in the January 17 *TDN* an editorial that is the most chilling piece of racing journalism in a long time. For import and vision, the only comparison I can make was a piece Jimmy Kilroe wrote for "Sports Illustrated" in 1967, when he said one day nobody would go to a track to see the races, but would watch them at a tele-theatre. Who could imagine such a thing ever happening?

Just as Kilroe foreshadowed racing's future back then, so has Finley given our sport a glimpse of the future, and it ain't pretty.

In case you missed Bill's piece, he wrote about Fort Erie trying to kill off live racing and stick with slots, which originally were put in to bolster an ailing local industry.

I realize it's heresy, especially for a racing man living in the Bluegrass, to take a stance against other forms of gambling that can add to purse money, but this is the case. My position is that the introduction of slots or other forms of casino gaming in the racing environment is a short-term fix that eventually will suck the life blood out of our game until it has been reduced to a sideshow at country fairs or seen only on a computer monitor in a virtual format.

Those in the State of Kentucky that would have slots at racetracks justify their stance based on positions that are incorrect. They admit that in the best of all possible worlds racing would not need slots, but now that the "genie is out of the bottle" Kentucky needs alternative gaming in order to compete with neighboring states.

Also, if purse levels at Kentucky tracks decline, it will adversely impact the state's "signature industry," because horse breeders and owners will decide to move their stock elsewhere.

This is incorrect.

Kentucky is the racing and breeding center of the world. It owes this status to the commitment of those participants that have decided to locate themselves here. Just because Pennsylvania, for example, will generate a considerable sum of money to enhance purses from alternative gambling does not mean that, for example, B. Wayne Hughes is going to sell Spendthrift Farm and move his stallions, broodmares and young horses to Pennsylvania. The notion is preposterous.

The people that choose to ply their trade or participate in horse racing in Kentucky have chosen to do so because of the lifestyle it offers. There is no other place in North America like Central Kentucky. Newmarket is grand and Chantilly is nothing to sneer at. But none boast the infrastructure of the bluegrass or its human expertise and pool of talent.

Here are two pet theories of mine: 1) racing is a leisure time activity and 2) no owners, except serious commercial breeders, are involved in racing to make money.

Oh, sure, every owner will tell you they are in the game to turn a profit. But I happen to know, from 40 years of experience, that the real reason people choose to play the game is because of the lifestyle. Those protesting that they are running a business are giving you the business. It's their way of trying to justify it to themselves, their spouses and their accountants.

No place in North America can offer the lifestyle of Kentucky if one is a die-hard participant in this endeavor.

When I started in racing, one of my first bosses liked to say "racing is the greatest game played outdoors." He was right.

Nowadays not many folks are playing it outdoors. They are sitting in front of monitors or TV sets watching and (God forbid) listening to a bunch of talking heads as they try to keep pace with video over which they have precious little control.

Of all the places in North America, or even the world for that matter, that have the best chance to avoid the trap of caving in to alternative forms of gambling, Kentucky is it.

Kentucky has arguably the most beautiful and well-attended racing meets in the nation at Keeneland. Kentucky has The First Saturday in May. Kentucky has the Keeneland and Fasig-Tipton sales. Kentucky has Rood & Riddle and Hagyard, Davidson and McGee. Kentucky has the Kentucky Farm Managers Club. Kentucky has Kentucky Equine Management Interns. Kentucky has the TRF Maker's Mark Secretariat Center. Kentucky has the Thoroughbred Charities of America. Kentucky has the Race for Education. Kentucky has Bloodstock Research and Equibase. Kentucky has the University of Kentucky and the Gluck Center and the Grayson Foundation and The Jockey Club. Kentucky has the NTRA. Kentucky has TOBA.

If the horse people and politicians concentrated all of their energy on promoting the game instead of focusing it on slots, Kentucky could turn things around and show the nation how to make the game work again. They not only can buck the trend, but turn it around. I want them to take this challenge.

Customers that want to make racing their leisure time activity seek to enjoy the sport-you heard me-the sport of racing. They also want to be able to bet a small amount of money and have a chance to win a lot of money.

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Men who have wives or girlfriends want to be able to bring them to a track that presents itself and its sport in such a manner that it makes the men proud to be in attendance. There are ways to do this.

People that play the races don't play slot machines or play the lottery, because those are mindless activities that do not involve intellect. Horseplayers are not dummies. They are proud of their handicapping skills and they want to be able to use them in an atmosphere where the sport of racing is the centerpiece.

Look (as our new President likes to say when making a point)--racing has shot itself in the foot more times than any other major sport with the possible exception of boxing. We gave up on TV early so that "we wouldn't give our product away." We failed to embrace the state-run lotteries that could have brought our game into every household in America. We blew our chances to make friends with the American Indians. All we have left are our fans.

Putting some VTLs at the racetrack is not going to bring in any new fans and it is not going to help us keep our current fans.

We are in the entertainment industry. CAN YOU HEAR ME OUT THERE? I said entertainment!

Let's start entertaining our fan base. Let's come up with some ways to entice them to the track and some new bets to keep them coming back. In my next Op/Ed piece, I will show the industry exactly how to do this, state by state. It is my gift to the game.

Today, the only sure lure to get regulars to show up during the week is by having a carry over. We need new bets that have the size of a carry over. These things can be done.

Will not having slots put tracks like Turfway Park or Ellis Park in jeopardy? Probably. But so what. There is too much racing, there are too many horses and there are too many racing dates. A little contraction can be a good thing, because the racing that survives will be stronger for it.

If racing is going to make it, let's find out now. Let's take our best hold and redesign the model to bring fans back to the track. If Kentucky cannot make it, no place can. I say it is better to see if we have a game that can survive on its own. If it can't, then we are all kidding ourselves. Are we really so selfish that in order to perpetuate a myth that we are willing to have a bunch of degenerate slot-machine junkies carry us on their backs?

So Kentucky--hot damn it--stop trying to introduce a virus that will kill our very game and instead focus on doing positive things to make the best aspects of the sport more appealing to those who would like to make it their favorite leisure-time activity.

Please, Kentucky--resolve to concentrate on pumping up the sport. Be proud of your heritage, your talent, your ingenuity and put your best foot forward. If successful, it just could lead to a revival of the sport in America.

If you cave in to slots, this game will return to the days of match races, and all we will have left is Bill Farish and Chris Young making side bets as their horses dash across an empty pasture at what once was Lane's End Farm. Lane's End--get it? It's a metaphor. I used to be a writer you know!