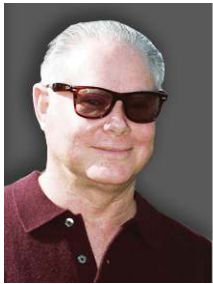


G MEN NEEDED



op/ed

by barry irwin

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Survival of Thoroughbred horse racing on the scale we have known it may be in greater jeopardy than usual because of a confluence of events that is being fueled by the current economic crisis.

Those of us who derive our incomes solely from the industry have come to fully realize horse racing is not an activity that is required for the existence of life. In the current climate, the only group outside of the game's participants that might like to see racing continue is the state governments where betting on horses is conducted, because tax revenue from horse racing in an age of unprecedented budget deficits is temporarily useful.

But don't get too comfortable with state governments, because in my opinion they are the single biggest detriment in allowing the sport to change for the better, so that it may grow and prosper.

States' rights has long been racing's biggest hurdle to clear in coming up with any plan that would lead to a cohesive national strategy for the sport. Each state is its own fiefdom with its own king (governor), its own round table (racing commission), tax collectors and citizens.

But unlike Camelot, there is no guidance from King Arthur and the would-be knights are not on a mission of good will.

Practically all of the ills now challenging the very existence of the game have been promulgated, fostered or allowed by the states, and, individually, few if any can solve the problems they have created.

Only the federal government of the United States has the power to rein in the states and create an atmosphere in which horse racing can cure its ills and move forward on sound footing.

The Feds ultimately control the signal through the Interstate Horseracing Act. This gives them the clout to bring the states in line. Should the Feds decide to use its might, several things could occur to bolster the game, as follows:

National Office--unlike the NTRA, which has little clout, one could be set up that would have some authority to bring cohesiveness to the enterprise, such as national scheduling.

Betting--take-out rates could be lowered and standardized nationwide.

Take-Out Split--an equitable division between the stakeholders could be standardized.

Drugs--a true national drug policy could be implemented.

Resources--funding could be better directed to create a national lab for drug testing and storing samples.

Enforcement--the FBI could be tapped to create an investigative force that could be used to police the sport.

Outside Oversight--racing, like other major league sports, has shown it cannot be trusted to self regulate. An independent office could be set up to keep the game on the level.

States have been a thorn in the side of racing since the inception of pari-mutuel wagering.

I don't want to pick on California, but I was born and lived there for more than half a century, I covered racing and politics as a columnist with *Daily Racing Form* and as editor of the *Thoroughbred of California*, so I am familiar with it. It provides several examples of what has gone wrong with racing under states' rights.

As in most states, California governors have handed out seats on the racing commission as a political plum for their supporters, whether they knew anything about the sport, or anything else.

For comic relief, there was one racing commissioner that could be counted on to fall asleep during every meeting of the CHRB. But it never impacted the proceedings, because the board always met in secret the day before and settled their business, so the meeting was simply theatre.

Over the past few years, the governor's appointee to head the racing board undertook several initiatives that some lawyers consider to be actionable, such as forcing racing associations to spend millions of dollars to install synthetic racing surfaces and owners of racehorses to have their stock compete on these surfaces before the tracks could be properly installed or tested.

Historically, California has been the breeding ground for two of the most disastrous calamities to have befallen any racing venue. California is the home of so-called "permissive medication," a ruse that was foisted on the sport in the guise of caring for equine athletes.

But the worst thing the State of California has been guilty of was allowing the administrative head of the racing board to undermine the laws of the jurisdiction by secretly cutting deals with drug cheats to lessen their suspensions and penalties, thereby creating a culture of doping horses that persists to this day and has tarnished a once proud sport.

States are not the best entity to foster the growth of Thoroughbred racing and breeding. First of all, in this era, they are cash starved and cannot be counted on to properly fund, govern, police or promote the enterprise. If anything, they are likely to try to squeeze the last bit of milk from this cash cow. California, once again, has shown how quickly a candidate for the state's highest office can favor Native American gaming at the direct expense of horse racing. I say give them their bite of the take-out in exchange for them fall in line with an industry run with federal oversight.

Right now horse racing has two big problems: states' rights and public relations. The PR problems racing faces are a direct result of action or inaction on the part of the states.

G Men cont.

Right now, as a result of lax, lame, foolish or downright stupid policies, racing has lost fans and gamblers. Without fans and gamblers, pari-mutuel racing cannot exist. The fans have been driven away because not enough people in charge of racing have cared enough to provide a sport in which the fans can reasonably expect to see humane treatment of the very animals for which the sport was created. This is still happening.

Gamblers--big gamblers that bet millions of dollars each--have been driven from the sport because rampant use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs has been allowed to proliferate. This is still happening.

Racing's stakeholders need to set aside their petty, inhumane, unsportsmanlike and selfish agendas that are contrary to the good of the game. With the Feds in charge, people found guilty of altering the outcome of a sporting event would be breaking federal law and could be sent to federal prison, not patted on the back, handed a meaningless fine and returned to the backstretch to rape and pillage again.

With a hammer over the head of the industry, the Federal government can tell the AAEP to rid its ranks of rogue veterinarians and to allow horses to train on therapeutic medication without racing on it. It is time for racetrack vets to take their oaths seriously and think of the greater good of the game, not the next race.

The Feds can tell the HBPA to cease and desist in its policy to continue to let horses run on medication. It is time for trainers to return to an era when they trained their own horses instead of relying on vets to do so and for them to use their skills and patience instead of drugs to keep horses going.

The Feds can restrict the use of jockeys' whips during the running of a race.

The Feds can create a national atmosphere wherein new betting schemes can be introduced that will invigorate the game.

Most important of all, with a true national office, stakeholders in racing will be encouraged to adopt policies that will present our game in its best light, one that is not drug induced or whipped into a frenzy.

There is a Trojan horse in our midst called casino gambling. We need to get strong and shore up our game before that friendly horse eliminates us out of its hind end.

Right now our product sucks as far as gaining new fans or resuscitating gamblers to carry the game on their backs. We need to show these people that we have enough faith in our own game to play it fairly and humanely.

"G Men Needed" is the final in a three-part Op-Ed Series by Barry Irwin. The first two parts may be accessed on our website by clicking here:

<http://www.thoroughbreddailynews.com/members/oped/>

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