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by corey johnsen

20-SOMETHING

I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard, "Horse racing is a dying sport. Its customers are doing just that--dying off--and there is no one to replace them. Young people don't like horse racing." And those statements were made by people within the industry!

I think it is important that I introduce you to Cole Coan and Jason Gibbons.

Cole is a 26-year-old resident of Richland Hills, Texas.

I recently attended his wedding, and was impressed by the design of his cake (see picture). To illustrate even more how much they love the sport, I gave Cole and his bride the choice between a kitchen appliance or a Calvin Borel



autographed photo of Rachel Alexandra as a wedding gift, and they both enthusiastically answered, "Are you kidding? The photo!" Cole and his wife attended the Preakness this year and had a great time.

Cole does not come from a horse-racing family. He is a normal 20-something sports fan. He was the captain of his Southlake Carroll High School football team as a 6-3, 260-pound defensive lineman. They finished 9-4 and went four rounds into the Texas High School playoffs. (By the way, it was the first year for Coach Todd Dodge, who later took Southlake Carroll to four state championships.) Cole then graduated from Texas Tech and got a job in the oil and gas business in Texas.

He attended his first horse race with an older brother at age 15, and has been hooked ever since. He has followed the sport for the last 10 years and enjoys the challenge of selecting a winner. For the Breeders' Cup this year, he and five friends (including wives and girlfriends) attended Lone Star Park and had a great time...and they even won a little money.

Cole's 20-something friend, Jason Gibbons, also loves the sport. A sales manager at a Dallas hotel, Jason qualified for the Daily Racing Form/NTRA National Handicapping Championship at a Lone Star Park qualifying tournament, surviving a grueling three-round competition. (By the way, Jason and I will be competing against each other in Las Vegas this weekend. I was fortunate to ride a great deal of beginner's luck and finish second in a qualifier at Del Mar.)

The top prize is \$500,000 to the winner, so Friday's and Saturday's competition in Las Vegas should be a great deal of fun.

Cole and Jason want horse racing to be successful.

Like any 20-something on an entertainment budget, they like free stuff, discounts and live music, all of which create a fun-loving, high-energy atmosphere. Mention college days or nights at the track, with free admission for students, add drink specials and live music, and Cole thinks you have a winner. Use all the new vehicles for communication, such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter, and there will be advertising savings and greater results. Cole and Jason had 20 other excellent ideas on how to increase business, such as beer and wine festivals, handicapping clubs, fraternity/sorority events, class reunions, collegiate handicapping challenges between schools, dollar days, etc. I think you get the picture.

Many other sports place an emphasis on marketing to the youth. Major League Baseball may be the best. Their teams host many giveaways directed at 12 and under, to attract youngsters and their parents. The Texas Rangers sponsor numerous clinics and other events to promote Little League baseball. When I was a member of the American Quarter Horse Association Racing Council in the 1990s, I witnessed the dedication of leaders such as Jim Helzer to promote youth involvement with that breed.

While I am not advocating totally ignoring families in horse-racing marketing, possibly we should view 20-somethings as our "youth."

They are at an age where they can legally play our game. Many are true entertainment seekers, without the pressures and time constraints of having to raise a family. If Cole and Jason are any indication, they love games and sports. And, as our sport continues to embrace technology, they will be comfortable with our new distribution channels. Do you know anyone under 30 who is not fluent with their cell phone and computer?

So, what should we do about this opportunity? I challenge all tracks and horsemen organizations to begin a 20-something marketing plan. In Kentucky, the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association works with the tracks to give away college scholarships during a day of racing. This has been a very successful promotion. Anyone who has ever been to Keeneland in the spring knows what I am talking about. Del Mar and Lone Star Park have used live music to drive young attendees. As president of Lone Star Park, I will never forget the night we hosted a Willie Nelson concert after the races. That promotion drew over 20,000 fans, and I found myself behind a bar assisting with the sale of more than 50,000 beers.

I will be playing to win in Friday's and Saturday's National Handicapping Championship. As a handicapper, I know that I am 250-1 to take home the trophy. As such, I am going to root for my young friend Jason. The positive reinforcement for him, and positive p.r. for our industry, far outweigh any personal profit motives I may have.

Well...almost.