



# op/ed

by bill finley

## IN NEW JERSEY, A BOLD IDEA THAT CAN CHANGE A SPORT

Horse racing's response to its myriad problems has too often been no response at all. There is too much racing, particularly too much bad racing, and not nearly enough betting dollars around to maintain the status quo, yet bold initiatives have been sorely lacking and the industry is led by individuals who have no true power and/or no good ideas. The situation has become so severe and so troubling that it was reasonable to fear that unless something dramatic happened, the very future of the sport was in jeopardy.

That something has happened.

Monmouth Park is going to be open for just 71 days this year, with the primary meet running in the heart of the summer, only on Monday holidays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and with the best purses in the sport. This is not just a good idea, it is the best idea anyone has had in this industry in a long, long time and exactly what this game needs. Monmouth has written a blueprint for horse racing's future. They are about to lead the way. If others follow, maybe this sport's future isn't so bleak after all.

This probably never would have happened if New Jersey racing hadn't been teetering on the edge. A new governor, Chris Christie, came in this year couldn't understand why the state-owned racing operations were set to lose \$13 million this year. The state couldn't afford that and the Atlantic City casino lobby will not allow Jersey tracks to have slot machines.

Christie appointed a commission--headed by Jon Hanson and Bob Mulcahy--to fix the economic drain that racing had become on the state, and they embraced the less-but-higher-quality racing plan.

It wasn't hard to figure out why New Jersey racing was struggling, and the answer wasn't just that it didn't have slot machines. New Jersey had become just like most every place else. With 141 days of thoroughbred racing, there was way too much product and way too many races that people simply didn't want to bet on. Monmouth is a beautiful and classy place, but the Wednesday and Thursday afternoons with 800 or 900 people milling around the building betting on \$10,000 conditioned claiming races with six-horse fields had beaten much of the life out of the place.

Somewhere along the line, at its core, the sport had lost the magic it once had. Sure, we still have Saratoga and the Kentucky Derby, but sometimes it feels like that's not what horse racing is about any more. Not really, anyway.

It's about churning out races; no matter how bad they are, no matter how empty the stands are and how depressing the sport had become. Just give them something, anything, to bet on. Monmouth was no different.

Monmouth Park's Vice President and General Manager Bob Kulina, more so than most in this business, has always understood what the fan wants and he knew it wasn't what New Jersey racing was putting out. A few minor changes wouldn't do, not when the place was bleeding red ink and a fiscally conservative governor said that was no longer acceptable. So, he knew he had to find a way to both cut down on expenses and dramatically increase the amount people were betting on Monmouth racing. The only way to do that, he figured, was to make New Jersey racing extraordinary special. And the only way to do that was to have a short meet with historically large purses.

"We saw what works in New Jersey," Kulina said. "The customers wanted a better product. This is about giving the players what they wanted. We are in the entertainment business and we needed to build a better product. We needed to go out and do something differently."

Monmouth will run an 'A' meet consisting of 50 days and a 'B' meet with 21 racing dates. There will not be a Thoroughbred meet at the Meadowlands this year, which no one will miss. The Thoroughbred game at the Meadowlands was dead, representing everything that is wrong with this sport.

It is the 'A' meet at Monmouth that has everyone excited. An average of \$1 million a day will be paid out, or nearly \$300,000 a day more than Saratoga, which was, in 2009, the track with the game's highest purses. A maiden special weight race will go for \$75,000 and first-level allowances will be worth as much as \$90,000. Those numbers guarantee great racing and full fields.

Just as importantly, a 50-day meet with three days of racing each week should invigorate on-track business. Rather than going on and on, racing will be limited at Monmouth. That works at Saratoga, Del Mar and Keeneland, where a day at the track is still something special and not one boring, meaningless afternoon in a long, long string of boring, meaningless afternoons.

The tricky part figured to be selling the concept to New Jersey horsemen, who could have insisted that New Jersey racing continue to conduct 141 days of live racing. More often than not, trainers and owners insist on having as much racing as possible. That's exactly the sort of thinking that has long persisted and has been so damaging to the sport. People always think of themselves and rarely about the overall good of the game. But, like Monmouth management, the New Jersey horsemen realized the very survival of racing in the state depended on making major changes. Not everyone is happy that there will be about half as many dates in New Jersey this year, but 71 dates sure beats zero. And zero was a distinct possibility in the near future.

"We had to look at the future," said New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association Acting President John Forbes. "We're surrounded by five states that have casino gambling and slots revenue. Our sense was that over the next five years we were going to be dying a slow death. We had to suck it up and focus on what we thought the customer wanted. Our business is going to be putting on horse racing and not bringing in people to play slot machines. We felt unless we responded to what the customer was asking for, which was larger fields and better quality, then there wouldn't be any other way to save ourselves from extinction."

Coming up with the money to pay out \$1 million a day won't be easy, but it can work. Kulina expects that handle will increase dramatically, because the racing will be so good, and it's a safe bet that he will turn out to be right. Monmouth also gets a purse supplement from the casinos and takes in millions in revenue from simulcasting and its OTB network, revenue that isn't necessarily dependent upon live racing. It makes a lot more sense to spread that money around over 50 days rather than 130.

Every racing jurisdiction in the country, in particular New York and California--two places where there should be a lot less racing than there is--should look at this, study it and copy it. Even in this depressed economy, there is plenty of money being bet on horse racing. The real problem is that, with so many tracks racing, there are way too many slices to the pie.

New Jersey racing was in critical condition. Now it's got a future bright beyond belief. Racing has been searching for answers, and this one is a huge first step.  
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