



Op/ed

by craig bandoroff

There were several news items that appeared recently in this publication that I found thought-provoking. The first was the article on John Fulton and the opportunities he is taking advantage of in Argentina. The second was the news that the NTRA had launched a virtual reality game based on different aspects associated with our sport and industry. The third was the continued excellent coverage of the current Monmouth Park meet.

John is a good friend of mine and I know that he has spent many years developing his contacts and expertise in the South American market. At a time when many of us are continuing to assess and evaluate our strategies in our changing North American market, John has decided his opportunity lies outside the U.S. Those of us in the industry with capital investment in land, infrastructure, racetracks, horses, etc. don't have that option available to us. We are confronted with trying to survive or flourish in the market and industry here. One can view this as troublesome or as an opportunity. What strikes me is the question: Why can't racing be popular here again? Why can't our sport flourish and appeal to the public like it does in virtually every continent throughout the world?

I believe that it can if it is well-presented and repackaged.

The development of the NTRA's game is a positive development. Can it catch on and make an impact? I'm sure the same question was asked about Facebook and other now ubiquitous forms of social media that are now successful beyond anyone's expectations. Provided with the proper tools, investment, and leadership I believe the NTRA's game can as well, as it deals with something everyone admires and has a fondness for: the horse. I was involved recently with several others in the industry who tried unsuccessfully to start a social media game concept developed by Anthony Manganaro. Unfortunately, in spite of support from numerous industry leaders, our industry's absence of centralization and structure resulted in Anthony abandoning an idea that many believe had exciting potential.

All of us are watching the Monmouth Park makeover with great anticipation and hope. It seems clear what the public demands in today's entertainment world. They want quality, they want special, and they want uniqueness. They want quality racing at attractive venues that are well attended by their peers. They don't want the same old inferior product at shabby facilities packaged in the same unexciting and boring manner that only the diehards attend.

We've all heard it too often lately: The definition of insanity is doing the same thing in the same way and expecting a different result. Does anything describe our industry's recent business models more accurately?

Change isn't always good for everyone. But, clearly, if we don't change and change quickly, our days may be numbered. Less racing at fewer places means the need for fewer horses, breeders, trainers, veterinarians, you name it. The pushback is always hard and the voices loud from those that won't survive a downsizing. But that's economics 101 and it's reality. Position yourself to survive. Innovate and change or find a new industry to make a living in but don't try and stop the change that is inevitable as the overall conditions deteriorate.

On a recent run in Central Park, I happened upon a crowded Central Park Zoo, teeming with smiling and noisy children. Their excitement to see the animals was uplifting. Is there anything kids and people love more than horses? I don't think so. That's why I truly believe that just as racing is still popular in many places around the world, it can be popular here again. Perhaps I'm being naive or Pollyanna-like in my attitude, but why shouldn't I be? We live in a world where there is very little quality entertainment that is affordable for many people. I recently attended a Major League Baseball game with my family on our annual outing to a Reds game. I have to believe the cost makes it an activity a family with average or median income cannot do very often. We live in a world where an umpire that blows a call and the pitcher who is the victim make news because they treat each other with dignity, respect and kindness. Don't tell me people can't be attracted to watch the most beautiful and majestic of creatures perform in quality facilities packaged as wholesome entertainment where gambling is only a part of the attraction. I believe they can be enticed to come back as fans.

We've read for many years what we need--structure, centralization, less regulation. All of that is true. What are needed now are the organizations that represent racetracks, owners, and horsemen to organize a Camp David-type summit where the leaders of our industry come together and structure some meaningful and real change. Will everyone like and embrace the solutions? No. Will everyone benefit from them? No. Can they actually come up with some changes in structure that can work? I don't know. I'm not talking about a Jockey Club RoundTable where everyone sits in a room, listens to a few speakers and little ever gets done or changes. I'm talking about locking themselves away and negotiating some real structural change and developing an industry model and racing schedule that has a chance to succeed and revitalize a fan base. I'm talking about getting in the boat and realize if we don't row in the same direction together, we are doomed and that time is running out.

Pollyanna thinking? Possibly.

Realistic? Questionable based on our past history.

Necessary? What was that definition of insanity?