



op/ed

by edd roggenkamp

WOULD A CENTRAL VISION FOR RACING BE SO BAD?

Just imagine a National Football League where every state had slightly different rules, perhaps nine-yard first downs when you play in Illinois and 11-yard first downs for games in Ohio. Imagine the NCAA basketball tournament if each of the eight "sweet 16" games were played on randomly different dates because the four host arenas could not agree on a coordinated schedule. And what if we could not watch all of those games on nationwide TV, because each arena had negotiated its own unique TV contract?

Imagine the consequences if each of the 23 NASCAR tracks had different car and safety specifications, based on the wisdom of state laws. Could they ever find enough qualified cars to fill out the 40-car field?

Imagine the N.Y. Yankees flying into Detroit to play the Tigers, but needing to arrive several hours early, so the players could be fingerprinted and photographed, and then pay a fee for a Michigan baseball player's license.

Imagine if you needed a local driver's license for every state when you traveled, or visualize using your cell phone if its technology was unique to only that "state" system. What foolishness would justify 50 unique state cell phone systems? Would that impede our nation's business efficiency?

Imagine using electricity if every state had different current specs, some 110 volts, some 220, some AC some DC, some three-plug some two-plug. We would have no national power grid, no sharing of generation sources, and no common manufacturing of appliances. Calculate the cost and inconvenience if every state required locally specific coffee pots and toasters and TV's. The famous inventor Thomas Edison lobbied hard for a DC electrical system, but lost the battle to George Westinghouse, who advocated AC power. Thank goodness visionary leaders rose above the pettiness and stepped in to install one system of standardization.

My point is that we all take standardization and coordination for granted in our everyday life. But we often fail to recognize that our standard of living, cost of goods and services and the convenience of everyday living would be severely impeded were it not for these simple common standards of commerce. However, those rules and standards were not always in place, and many came only after brutal standardization battles fought years ago in every industry, often forced by legislation and the foresight of the federal government.

The battle for national standards and governance in the horse racing industry is no less important. It is a battle that I believe must be fought if the industry hopes to have a future. Most owners and trainers race in multiple states and the complexity is needlessly expensive for horse owners and the states. Most of the differences result only in pointless frustration. What does our sport gain from every state having its own medication, betting integrity and horse and rider safety rules? This is especially true at a time when many states are cutting the budgets of their racing commissions, leaving them understaffed and ill equipped to properly do all facets of their job. Michigan is down to two days of racing per week mainly because the state budget is too strapped to pay salaries for racing officials.

How much expense does this 34-state redundancy add to a sport where the owners are already struggling to survive financially? What do we get in return for this heavy expense, besides a few local patronage jobs and a lot of mini-fiefdoms?

How much fan base do we lose in the many states and cities where there is no local racing? How do you build a fan base without promotion and TV exposure?

Meanwhile, America's growing and thriving sports all have these factors in common:

- One set of consistently followed game rules
- Coordinated dates, schedules and playoffs
- An overarching national TV contract
- Coordinated promotion and customer communication
- Common and consistent rules of conduct for players, officials and owners

If these decisions were hashed out and agreed upon nationally, then the local officials could do their real job of ensuring compliance, policing the sport and running a good and honest race meet. Why is that so onerous and threatening to the leaders of our sport? Would they choose to keep the sport of horseracing in a steep 40-year decline rather than have basic commonsense national standards, coordination and promotion?

Make a rule, and I'll play by it, but please don't burden me with three or four conflicting or overlapping rules of no real significance to the horse's performance or the safety or integrity of our sport.

Edd Roggenkamp retired as General Manager of Dealer Operations for General Motors in 2001 and moved to a farm in Versailles, Kentucky order to have more years to hunt, fish and race horses "while still young enough and healthy enough to enjoy it." He now devotes most of his energy to raising, training and racing Thoroughbreds on the Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio circuit. For 30 years, he raised and competed with field trial bird dogs and is a past President of a National Field Trial Association.