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by bill finley

FROM THE HARNESS GAME, HOPE

By Bill Finley

Amid the slumping economy, the empty grandstands and the tumbling bottom line, it's sometimes easy to



Jeff Gural www.observer.com

forget that horse racing can be pretty special, even rather popular. Jeff Gural remembers. He came into the sport of harness racing during its golden era, when the stands were packed at Yonkers and Roosevelt Raceways and a driver, Carmine Abbatiello, had his own beer commercial. Whether it's harness or Thoroughbred racing, Gural isn't convinced that the sport can't

climb its way back and do so without a crutch called slot machines.

That's why he's willing to take a huge chance on the Meadowlands, a once-bustling, profitable operation that has become a sad, decrepit money drain, a track New Jersey Governor Chris Christie had given up for dead. Maybe Gural is right and maybe harness racing at the Meadowlands can rise again under his leadership. Everyone should hope so. This is about more than a harness track; it's about smart, well-meaning people who will do everything in their power to revive a horse-racing product with the type of vision and leadership that has been missing from all horse racing industries. Should this work, Gural will have proven something for both breeds--that all it takes to get the sport back on its feet is a willingness to do the right things, tough as they may be.

Like Monmouth Park, the Meadowlands is owned by the state of New Jersey and it loses money. Both breeds saw slot machines at the Meadowlands as the magic wand that would make everything right again, but the Atlantic City casinos and their political clout have always stood in the way. When Christie was elected last year, he not only made it clear that he would not allow slots at the tracks, but that he had no intention of continuing to subsidize New Jersey racing, either with state money or with casino money that was being used to prop up purses.

With the last day of racing scheduled at the Meadowlands on Dec. 18 and with no solutions in sight, Christie was ready to close the most important harness track in America, if not the world. The effects on the entire industry would have been devastating.

Enter Gural.

Gural is the chairman of Newmark Knight Frank, a commercial real estate firm in New York City. He's made a lot of money in the real estate business, but his real passion is harness racing. A long-time horse owner and breeder, he became a racetrack owner when he bought Vernon Downs and opened Tioga Downs once slots were approved at the New York tracks.

There's no doubt that Gural would never have become a track owner if it weren't for the slots, but he's not at all like most racino operators. At Vernon and Tioga, a major emphasis is put on the racing. It's marketed and promoted. The racing fans are treated like valued and respected customers, and Gural and his team are always looking for new ways to make the on-track experience better and lure more people through the door. It's universally recognized that under Gural's leadership, Vernon and Tioga have grown into the type of success stories that are increasingly hard to find in racing these days.

There's no great secret here. Gural just does all the things everyone knows need to be done to make racing successful, but so few are willing to try.

At his tracks, there is an opening and closing day and most cards are held on the weekends. They are not gambling factories. He gives people a reason to look forward to live racing, just like they do at Keeneland, Saratoga and Del Mar, three tracks still prospering in Thoroughbred racing. As best he can at tracks that don't produce huge betting handles, he puts together quality programs with races rich enough to attract the sport's biggest stars.

"I don't see why horse racing can't be popular," Gural said. "It's popular in Saratoga Springs. It's popular in Lexington, Kentucky. It's just not popular when you race 52 weeks a year, five days a week. If we became a Saratoga-type experience, where people know this is a fun place to go, they're open on weekends in the summer and when I go there I'll have a good time, then it can work."

He wants to operate about 100 days a year, including a Monmouth-style elite meet with a full slate of major races like the Meadowlands Pace and the Hambletonian.

But even a short, quality meet won't work at a place that is a dump, and the Meadowlands has become just that. He says it's not the type of place someone would ever dream of taking a date, so he wants to create an entirely new grandstand. It will be small, modern, comfortable, with good food and drink and all sorts of amenities. It will be clean. It will be customer-friendly.

"I have no interest in trying to figure out a way to run the Meadowlands as it is and make a profit, because I don't think you can," he said. "I don't think it's the type of place I would bring my girlfriend to if I were out on a date. The place is obsolete and falling apart."

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At Tioga, he lowered the takeout and saw handle soar. He says that won't be as easy to do at the Meadowlands because Tioga's revenue largely comes from slots while all of the Meadowlands' revenue comes from wagering. But he has proven at Tioga that a lower takeout will stimulate the volume of betting and he will keep his eye on doing something similar at the Meadowlands.

He's also adamant that the sport find a way to keep its stars campaigning beyond their three-year-old years, something that is also a big problem in harness racing. Gural is pushing for adding a provision to the conditions for the stakes at the Meadowlands, Vernon and Tioga that a horse is ineligible if his sire was not at least five at the time the horse is conceived. That would all but force horses to stay in training as 4-year-olds. No one would buy a yearling who is not eligible to compete in several of the sport's biggest stakes.

"If I am putting my money up and we're going to try to get people to come here with no slot money and no subsidy from Atlantic City, I need (2009 Harness Horse of the Year) Muscle Hill to race at my track at four," he said. "The next time a Muscle Hill comes around, we have to keep him competing. I need him to race six or eight times and I need the purse money to be there for it to make sense for him to race."

Gural hasn't committed to anything yet. He helped broker a deal with Christie to keep the track open through March. Over the next three months or so, he's going to sit down with architects and the money people and try to figure out if his vision of a new Meadowlands makes economic sense. He will only lease or buy the track from the state if he is convinced he can make this work.

But Gural isn't talking like he's about to back away.

"This is a challenge," he said. "I like challenges."

This is his vision: a racetrack run by the best and smartest in the business, people who care about the sport and not just the slots, a racetrack that treats its customers like royalty, a racetrack that has a short, exciting meet with great racing.

He wants the takeout to be lower, and he wants to cater to big bettors. He wants to make a day at the track fun again. He wants the stars not to come and go quite so fast. He wants to make horse racing work, work so well that it doesn't need slot machine handouts.

"We have to change the model," he said. "We're playing the same movie over and over again, and the public has given its opinion on what they think of the movie. We have to change the movie."

If things go right, the Meadowlands will embark on an exciting new era come April 1 with Gural taking over. He will change the model; he will start playing a better movie. If this works, he will have shown others what to do. Root for him. *Have feedback for publication? Email suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com or post your comment in the [TDN Forum](#).*