



op/ed

by Edward I. Bowen

NYRA AND THE CUP

Considerable debate has gone on in recent years about whether the Breeders' Cup would best serve its purposes by establishing a permanent base for its annual two days of racing. Having followed and written about racing history for many years, I have been keenly interested in this debate. In my opinion, a number of individuals who have not been in the game for more than 25 years or so might be overlooking at least one aspect of the history of the Breeders' Cup which I believe should take the permanent-site option off the table.

I speak of the role played by the New York Racing Association during the germination days of the Breeders' Cup as it went through the stages from concept, to shaping, to reality.

When the Breeders' Cup was being developed, NYRA had as close to a climactic annual series of races as North American racing offered at the time. In 18 of the previous 36 years, the Jockey Club Gold Cup winner had been Horse of the Year. Similarly, NYRA's Champagne Stakes had been won by a juvenile champion in 19 of the last 27 years, the Frizette had been won by the eventual juvenile filly champion in 17 of the last 29 years, and the Beldame had been won by either the three-year-old filly champion or older distaff champion 26 times in the last 38 seasons. Clearly, New York in the fall was the prestige locale--the Big Apple for sure.

From the standpoint of a racing journalist at the time, I recall musing on whether the powers that be at NYRA would (1) welcome the Breeders' Cup, or (2) see it as a rival and try to protect their own territory--a stance not unknown in Thoroughbred racing. It occurred at the time that bumping up the purses for specific races and fiddling about with their dates would allow NYRA to get in some blows difficult for the fledgling entity of the Breeders' Cup to overcome.

Instead, NYRA apparently accepted that the Breeders' Cup was a positive for the industry overall and allowed its own climactic races to be subjugated to the role of preps. In fact, a number of the bellwether races of the NYRA autumn have been grouped in some years and promoted as Preview Weekend--a strong admission that, "We are not the top dog anymore, but a stepping stone to the championship day."

Of course, it was inherent in that stance that the quality of NYRA racing meant it deserved being in the rotation of Breeders' Cup presentations from time to time. Two of the first seven runnings of the Breeders' Cup were held at NYRA tracks, as have three subsequent runnings.

We have every confidence that the personal codes of integrity of the Breeders' Cup's present leaders would steer them away from such a scenario as, "You were with me from the start. You helped me get established and have been a willing supporter all along. However, I just don't need you anymore. Goodbye."

Yet, in an institutional sense, that is exactly what the Breeders' Cup would be doing inadvertently were it to crowd NYRA out of the picture insofar as never having further opportunities to host the event.

There is also another pragmatic reason for the Breeders' Cup board to keep NYRA in the mix. It is a matter of playing sound defense. A scorned NYRA, with the increased muscle of anticipated casino revenues, might reverse the course of its predecessors and adopt a competitive stance, upping purses here and there and switching dates in an attempt to bring to its own fans the best horses in climactic meetings.

For some sporting spectacles, permanency of location is part of the magic. These would include the Kentucky Derby, the Masters Tournament, and the Indianapolis 500. For others, energy is augmented by changes in locale, i. e., the Super Bowl, the NCAA Basketball Tournament, the U. S. Open golf tournament. Those were pretty wise fellows who organized the Breeders' Cup as a moveable feast, and I hope that it will always remain so.

Ed Bowen is the author of 19 books on Thoroughbred racing.

Comments for publication? Send an email to suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com or post a comment on the TDN Forum on our home page.