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MEETING THE OBJECTIVE

The decision by TOBA's American Graded Stakes Committee (AGSC) to withdraw the ban on medication in this year's 2-year-old graded stakes races was a crushing blow to the industry and the organization's members.

How can TOBA, and the breeders it represents, lose another generation? And, how do we avoid the media and handicapping catastrophe when we continue lax med rules for 2-year-old graded stakes, then run the Breeders' Cup without meds?

The people who worked on the AGSC got the objective right, but they went wrong on the strategy to implement the ban. This is too important to fail for lack of a winning strategy.

If you want to fail in this industry, use a strategy that requires approval.

TOBA's original strategy required approval from state regulators who are influenced by many opposed to a ban on drugs, i.e. 40,000 plus horsemen, vets and track operators.

TOBA can change the graded stakes conversation with a creative new strategy that only requires about 400 racehorse owners, many of whom are TOBA members are like-minded about a ban on drugs.

Currently, TOBA awards blanket graded stakes status to every horse in the race.

Instead of awarding blanket race status and walking away, TOBA can make the races *graded stakes eligible* and require each horse be made eligible. Eligibility includes Super-testing your horse. If the horse fails the tests, TOBA will not award graded status. These tests would be independent of the local jurisdiction rules and have no effect on the outcome of the race.

With this simple change in policy and strategy, TOBA can achieve the following objective that is second to none in the world:

"Every 2-year-old in North America that earned graded stakes status in 2012 raced free of medication and performance-enhancing substances."

Then in 2013, those 2-year-olds and others will graduate to become eligible and compete in drug-free 3-year-old graded stakes.

TOBA's original strategy required state regulatory approval that isn't needed. Graded stakes status can be between TOBA and the racehorse owner. Nobody else needs to be involved.

TOBA handles the graded stakes program because it is the breeders' organization.

While graded stakes are important to tracks and horseplayers, they are a tool and method for breeders to prove the breed.

Graded stakes have great value to racehorse owners. Thus, TOBA has something racehorse owners want. That's always a good place to start.

Who pays for the testing? The racehorse owner, who wants the graded status, will find the testing expense is minor compared to the increased value to their horse as a broodmare or stallion prospect.

Under the current system, where state regulators allow permissive medication, racehorse owners have been given an easy out: "It's not me, it's the system". TOBA has the ability and the responsibility to change the conversation and say, "It is you and we're going to make you accountable if you want graded stakes status."

The tracks with the graded stakes will find those races, without performance-enhancing drugs, have much greater value and appeal both on-track and in the off-track market.

What if someone doesn't make his or her horse eligible? That's on them for the entire world to see and media to question. Think about it. With just 45 races, this is a very small pool of owners who want graded status.

What happens if non-eligible horses win or place in the graded stakes-eligible race?

They don't receive the graded status, yet they will receive something of a scarlet letter on their race record. If you see where a horse won a stakes that was graded stakes eligible, but the horse did not get graded status, that's a red flag for breeders and auction buyers.

This isn't the same situation as the fight to prohibit medication in all racing. The majority of horsemen will have no problem with this strategy in graded stakes, as long as it doesn't impact the other 50,000 races. The problem they had with the original TOBA strategy was that it would have changed state rules. Under this strategy, no rules change. This is just between TOBA and the racehorse owner.

If the original TOBA plan had gone forward, the rules for 2-year-old graded stakes in 2012 meant this generation would have been the first in North America to be clean... well, sort of clean.

The reality is, even if our graded stakes were run without race-day medication, the jurisdictions rules on meds are not apples to apples. The rules on what is allowed in Kentucky are not the same as California, New York and Florida. The resulting catalogue pages showing Grade I, Grade II, Grade III means you would need to know what jurisdiction's rules applied. And those question marks equal lower value.

This new strategy of eligibility Super-testing at the national level, through TOBA, means each 2-year-old graded stake can be judged apples to apples.

TOBA's appeal to the international cataloguing standards will be to change policy on 2012 graded stakes for 2-year-olds, from a blanket status based upon the race, to those eligible horses earning graded status.

The international community wants North American graded stakes drug free, they will help ease the transition.

Will it complicate catalog pages? Not really, computers do the work. On the horse's page, those awarded graded status by TOBA would have a bold Grade I, Grade II, or Grade III after the race. The race record of those not eligible, or with failed test results, would have no graded designation after the race.

Those of us who have worked in Thoroughbred advertising have always had to be aware of changes in race status. The race could move to first-time Grade III in 1999, then be a Grade II in 2005, and back again. Instead of memory, you go with what Equibase prints out. Will there be an adjustment period? Sure.

But, instead of getting bogged down in details that will be worked out, let's focus on what happens in North America when TOBA delivers on this objective:

"Every 2-year-old that earned graded stakes status in 2012 raced free of medication and performance enhancing substances."

Recently, I've been on a writing binge, because some problems that seem hopeless actually have easy solutions, if we just look at them differently.

Instead of an original strategy guaranteed to fail because of opposition by horsemen, TOBA can employ a new strategy where about 400 racehorse owners make their 2-year-olds eligible in 45 Graded Stakes. Many of those owners will be TOBA members and support the ban on drugs.

Can this still be done in 2012? Sure. We're just talking about 45 races. This new strategy needs to be vetted quickly. It isn't any more complicated than state breeding program eligibility, but its impact will be felt around the world.

Right now might be the most embarrassing moment in TOBA's history. We can change that and make TOBA more relevant than ever before. I would like to see a lot of the folks who resigned invited back.

TOBA needs an emergency meeting of the AGSC and if the strategy passes by just one vote, that's enough. They can then turn it over to the lawyers to draft eligibility forms. If they pay the lawyers on a project basis, not billable hours, we might have it next week.

This is a crisis and we need crisis management. TOBA needs to call all-hands-on-deck and make this happen. And it needs the resolve to shake off confidence-busting failure with a clear plan for the future.

At the end of the movie, *The Right Stuff*, the narrator talks about the space program's disappointments, then concludes with, "But on that glorious day in May 1963, Gordo Cooper went higher, farther, and faster than any other American... Gordo Cooper became the greatest pilot anyone had ever seen."

Let's hope the leaders of TOBA have the right stuff.