



op/ed

by craig bandoroff

REFLECTIONS AS WE TURN THE PAGE ON 2012

I read with interest Charlotte Weber's letter that appeared in the *TDN* on Dec. 21. That same day I also read the CNN article, "How Racing Became Cool" and an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on hand-held devices and Internet gambling. The combination gave me cause for year-end thoughts as we turn the page on 2012.

There isn't a more constant and loyal supporter of American racing and breeding than Charlotte Weber that comes to my mind. To refer to her as a stalwart of the sport isn't an exaggeration. Her words struck true with me because they remind me of two important takeaways I had during a period of time I spent several years ago exploring ways to revitalize our sport and coalesce our industry. Working with Anthony Manganaro, Duncan Taylor, and Doug Cauthen, I attended several meetings exploring "next steps" for an industry in crisis. Although, as of this writing the project is dead, I had the opportunity to meet several very bright people in the world of sports entertainment and sports law. The takeaways I came away with were this:

1. Our industry needs a strong owners group to represent and assert themselves and take control of their product and the playing field. The present model where the racetracks (movie theaters) and trainers (directors) have more control than the owners (film studios) is backwards and detrimental.
2. We need racetracks that present our sport in a modern fashion that can compete with other major league sports and leisure activities. Fans want an experience that represents value, in attractive, clean, technologically advanced, modern facilities.

Although a handful of racetracks provide a quality experience, many like Calder that Charlotte references, seem to have little interest in promoting our sport or providing their patrons with a quality experience. Further evidence of many racetrack operators and the industry's deficiency is the absence of allocating slot revenue to make capital improvements to the racing areas of their facilities and develop a meaningful marketing plan to promote racing. Perhaps a strong owners group could show the way by attracting investors to own and operate a state of the art race track unlike any we have presently?

The CNN article illustrated that the large ship can change course. England now has attractive and modern facilities offering a pleasant experience for their patrons. Placing the emphasis on the social experience has helped revitalize the sport and attracted a young audience. What reasons are there that, if a similar model was employed here following best practices in places like England, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan, where racing is popular, that we wouldn't see similar results?

If Internet gambling is soon to be with us and patrons can gamble on their hand-held mobile devices as outlined in the *WSJ* article, then a threat like we have never seen may be upon us. The ease of play, convenience and addiction factor make this a competitive force that could be a lethal threat to many gambling entities, not just racing. It puts even greater need for the points outlined above; modern clean facilities enhancing the social experience of a day out.

As we close the book on another year it seems to me that there are "green shoots" out there that provide reasons for hope. Organizations like The Jockey Club, Breeders' Cup, and RMTC are taking the lead on numerous important fronts that have required attention for years. They are committing capital and taking important steps to lead us in several critical areas. They should be applauded for and supported in their efforts.

Let's hope that 2013 can see further progress. We all know the world doesn't stand still and the competition isn't resting.

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