



op/ed

by rob whiteley

As Tim Capps wrote in his recent Op/Ed ([Finding a Way Forward for Horse Racing](#), *TDN*, June 25, 2010)

"people who love racing in America ... are more concerned about its health, well-being and, above all future, than at any time in the writer's increasingly lengthy memory." Concern, however, is not enough. We need active love.

This is clearly a time for people who love racing to speak up, to find a way to make their voice heard, and to get involved. In this time of current crisis, it is not OK for those who love the sport to go about business as usual, while passively watching (or conveniently ignoring) our steady qualitative and quantitative decline. It is not OK to do nothing, any more than it is OK to stand by on the sidewalk and look on while someone is being mugged or beaten. (In this instance, hands-on horsemen, racehorse owners, bettors, and our equine athletes are the ones being mugged and beaten).

Op/Ed Feedback cont. p6



Op/Ed Feedback cont.

And, as members of an intertwined Thoroughbred community, it is also not OK to mind our own business while the business of others goes down the drain along with the sport as we know it or wish it to be.

Although much damage has already been done, we still have a tiny window of opportunity to create the kinds of changes that can make a difference, but we need people across all strata to join hands and work actively together...or get out of the way. Dylan's great American ballad still has sway after nearly 50 years, "get out of the way if you can't lend a hand, the times they are a'changin'."

A few recent events reflect a growing awareness that change must occur: several racing commissioners continue to talk about a partial compact; a large number of internet blogs have been spawned that target important issues; Bobby Kulina and his team at Monmouth designed a risky but innovative new paradigm for their race meet; an unusually large number of individuals (28) ran for the Breeders' Cup board, presumably to help it become more than a two-day event that is largely unknown to the general public, etc. But we need many more initiatives that target the lack of cohesion and innovation that defines our industry.

In particular, we need our younger, technology-driven generation of horsemen (those who will inherit this sorry complex of fractionated interests and general dysfunction), to mobilize their IT acumen and social networking platforms in order to shake up the "status quo," create virtual horseracing games and experiences, laser the moss off the Trustees Room at Belmont Park and other rooms like it, breathe down the necks of racing commissioners, and sculpt a future for themselves and the sport they love. The bar has been set low by their elders, and they can do much better if they organize effectively and develop imaginative strategies. Toward that end, a recently formed organization called Vision 20/20 (a group of young horse professionals under the age of 40) gives a glimmer of hope for a better tomorrow.

Unless our young people can figure a way out through the maze of fiefdoms and disparate rules and regulations, we will soon have status similar to boxing. Tim Capps, on the other hand, takes an historian's perspective and believes that "a turn-around WILL come and perhaps is already underway." I don't see it and I don't believe it. Our fundamentals were in serious decline before the recession and financial crisis hit the general economy, and the notion that our horse business will "come back" with the overall economy (when and if that happens) appears to be nothing more than wishful thinking.

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--Charlie Boden ”

In my opinion, an historical view does not apply to our current circumstance. We have never been here before. Our problems in combination are severe and unique within the history of American racing: intense competition for the gambling dollar from superior marketers in other wagering venues; a loss of fans and TV exposure to major sports (we are now a minor sport and slipping); a broken simulcast and racing model that deprives bettors, owners, and tracks of a fair return on investment, and pits them against each other; a 20-year drain of our top quality bloodstock to foreign shores; widespread substitution of veterinary intervention for true horsemanship; a drug problem that persists because of multiple sets of regulations and inadequate testing and enforcement; a shrinking fan and owner base; a dual disconnect between stud fees and breeder profitability on the front end of the production chain, and between training and vet expenses and purses for owners at the back end; constant scrutiny from animal rights activists; and, in many instances, the devastation of having the same people making decisions year after year.

Op/Ed Feedback cont.

For sure, historical or academic perspectives have their uses. Analyzing what has gone on before may yield useful insights that can inspire or guide new or reformulated strategies. And the timeless observation that "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it," is a truism that applies to any era. However, thinking that things will somehow get better because we have had other downturns and have always "come back" is a highly speculative use of history, especially given today's kaleidoscopic set of vexing variables within a fast-paced and rapidly changing world.

Squinting through an historical lens reveals the harshest reality of all: we humans have squandered the most exquisite advantage in all of sport, the equine athlete and the intrinsic fascination that many humans have for horses. We have been given a magical gift; but we have brought no magic of our own.

Of course, there will always be horse racing. As Tim Capps wrote, "people are not going to stop liking horses, or enjoying seeing them run, or wanting to bet on the outcome." However, the landscape for the next Tim Capps to write about 20 years from now will be greatly changed, and many hands-on horsemen (who generally love horses more profoundly and intimately than those who watch them or write about them) will be gone from the scene, unnecessarily.

Inevitable contraction will recast the sport to resemble earlier eras when it became known as the Sport of Kings and was almost exclusively a playground for the powerful and privileged. The only thing different will be the size of the crowds. We will have a few boutique meets like that of Keeneland, Del Mar, Saratoga and Monmouth, and a few big events. Our once thriving industry that employed tens of thousands of individuals and accounted for billions of dollars in GDP will be little more than a club sport for the wealthy, and a national afterthought that will occasionally catch the public's eye around a big event or special horse.

Thus, if you are an industry participant who loves horses and wants more than this scenario (whether you are a vet, bloodstock agent, owner, trainer, van driver, breeder, stallion manager, sales company executive, farrier, feed man, fence builder, groom, hotwalker, or alphabet Board member, etc.), you have a responsibility to yourself and a shared responsibility to others. Therefore, please ask yourself what you have done today (and each day) to help make things better for the industry as a whole, and find a way to make your voice heard. -Rob Whiteley may be reach through www.liberationfarm.com