



Question
of the month

sponsored by
LANE'S END
(859) 873-7300
lanesend@ix.netcom.com
www.lanesend.com

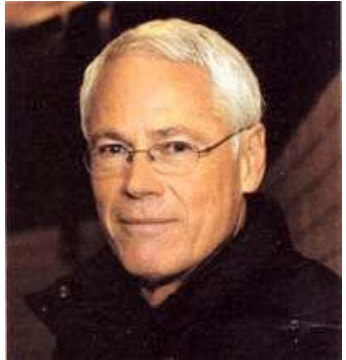
What are some positive steps racing should take in the wake of the Eight Belles tragedy, both for the safety of the horses and in light of the mounting public criticism of the sport?



ROB WHITELEY, LIBERATION FARM

First of all, I suggest that everyone carefully re-read and digest the thoughtful Letters to the Editor written by Arthur Hancock and Brereton Jones in the May 8 and 9 editions of the TDN.

Arthur refers to our industry as a ship without a rudder that is destined for the rocks, unless we utilize the Horse Racing Act of 1978 and submit to federal legislation and oversight to stay on course. However, if the federal government becomes the captain of our ship, we might as well take three torpedoes in our hull right now and end our suffering.



It would be a disaster to have the Feds *initiate* legislation that tells us what to do and how to do it. If federal legislation becomes a part of our enterprise, it needs to come when we have cohesively organized ourselves to a point where *we, not the federal government*, are the initiators of specifically and narrowly crafted federal statutes that serve our purposes of standardizing racing rules and enforcing compliance by all industry factions. Brerie underlines the importance of unity if we are to avoid unwanted federal interference.

In Brerie's words, "Change can come, but it will only come as a result of a unified effort...racing must have a National Governing Body that oversees the enforcement of standard rules in every state [and I don't mean the Federal Government]." Whether or not we end up involving the federal government to achieve standardization and accomplish strategic compliance objectives, it is clear that we must quickly come together in a more unified way.

We horsemen are mostly independent minded and competitive people who like to do our own thing. Therefore, the idea of unity may seem alien or objectionable to many of us. But joining together in this time of crisis, with common goals and shared purposes, is essential to our being able to stay afloat, endure and prosper. These are not merely storm clouds that we are seeing all around us. This is a tempest, and the angry turbulence carries the potential to become "a perfect storm." In the midst of this dangerous volatility, the phrase, "United we stand, divided we fall," has never had more meaning for us than it does now.

So how do we accomplish cohesiveness and unification? The first step is fully recognizing and accepting that, without unity, we will continue to sink or be sunk. Simply put, therefore, we can choose to work together to stay afloat, or we can all sink together.

ROB WHITELEY, LIBERATION FARM cont.



Question
of the month
Continued...

Sponsored by
LANE'S END

ROB WHITELEY, LIBERATION FARM cont.

The second step in achieving unity requires abandoning our business-as-usual “fiefdom model,” whereby each entity operates as an independent special interest group, merely looking after its own territory or revenue without collaborating cooperatively or making sacrifices for the common good.

The third step is to establish a leadership entity or consortium (i.e., Brerie's “National Governing Body”) that has our full support in creating and implementing standardized rules, practices and commonly held strategic objectives in all jurisdictions, nation-wide. Using Arthur's nautical imagery, accomplishing our goals requires exerting the authority and efficiency that comes from having one captain and one agenda. Once we have a captain, the rest of us, in the interest of self preservation, need to jump on board and join ranks as cooperative shipmates. If we need a motivating wind at our back, it should be the obvious fact that our ship is at grave risk, and the knowledge that when our ship goes down, we all go down.

Stating what is now clear to everyone, this is a special time, a time of crisis. We have reached a tipping point whereby our steadily sinking ship has opened too many gaping holes beneath the water line and the turbulent waves around us give ominous counterpoint to the unsettled horizon. Simply delivering the message that, “We have been studying the problems and will continue to do so,” is inadequate. This is a time for action--the most effective and compelling action: direct, practical, collective, coordinated and focused action. Three months from now, our critics are not going to ask us *what we think*. They are going to ask us *what we've done*.

So, what do we need to do, other than join together with a cooperative spirit? Very simply, our immediate focus and use of funds should go toward addressing public perception and giving the public what it wants. The public wants three things: (1) *drug-free racing*; (2) *safer track surfaces*; and (3) *no whipping*. We can deliver all three, and it is to our shame that we haven't given them all three long ago, without them asking. OK, so some of the unreasonable zealots and their shrill, strident and generally poorly informed voices of outrage are offensive to our ears. But their message hits the mark. To use a Yogi-ism, “We must not forget what we must have forgotten.” Somehow we have lost sight of the core maxim in our business: “*We are also best served when we do right by the horse.*” Looking honestly into the mirror reveals that we must do much better by our horses and our fans.

Regarding drugs, the documented decline in average starts per horse is less likely a function of breeding practices than it is a function of our drug culture, the effects of drugs on horses, and the expedient substitution of drugs for proper training methods. Regarding track surfaces, we have done enough research to know that, despite quirks and foibles that still need to be addressed and fixed, synthetic tracks reduce catastrophic injuries. Regarding whips, large numbers of fans and onlookers, and a cross-section of seasoned horsemen, find it appalling to watch horses abused by harsh or excessive and often counter-productive whipping in nearly every race. *Plain and simple, we can repair a lot of damage and appease our angry national audience by taking most drugs out of the racing barns and relying on basic horsemanship rather than veterinarians, installing synthetic tracks in every jurisdiction, and placing whips in jockeys' hands for safety purposes only.* This is not just liberal, soft-hearted talk. This is hard-nosed logic and practical common sense. The formula is not complicated. When we properly serve and care for the horse, we bring in new fans and keep the ones we've got; and when we satisfy the fans, we build our business and help ourselves.

Now, the biggest question of all: How do we get organized structurally to right our ship? Who do we look to for leadership? I have been struck by the number of people who have expressed to me the opinion that the people who have “led” us into our predicament cannot possibly lead us out. Many working people in the trenches think that many of our industry leaders are complacent, self-serving, unimaginative, behind the curve and generally ineffective, either because they are encapsulated and protected by their wealth, or because they are not significant stakeholders. I, however, am much more optimistic than that. I believe that some people can rise to the occasion in times of crisis, when at other times they may not. And I believe that there are capable leaders in our midst who may emerge and surprise us with their strength of leadership, if given the proper support and structure.

So what should that structure be? Ask yourself, who do we already pay significant money to that conducts legislative initiatives, has a national presence, a logo that looks similar to the NBA, NFL and MLB, and has the recognized name, *National Thoroughbred Racing Association*? No other entity is positioned as well as the NTRA to bring us all together as a unified industry.

I believe, therefore, that we should empower the NTRA with a mandate to create a leadership coalition that pulls together major industry entities under one banner for the purpose of establishing standardized policy and procedures, speaking with a single voice, and providing a steady hand at the helm to chart our ship's course going forward. Given our dire industry circumstances and the prospect of a perfect storm approaching, the TRA and member tracks, The Jockey Club, TOBA, sales companies, and major horsemen's groups should climb on board with a cooperative spirit as members of the ship's crew. In short, we need to provide the NTRA with a mandate and the necessary support to create a strong and unifying leadership group that can work quickly to raise all our boats.