

Saturday,
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Can California Harness Racing Be Saved?

By Lucas Marquardt

There is hope among California harness horsemen that someone will step in and save racing in the state. But who and when? And can a small, remote track without slots or even the promise of slots make it in the current environment? As the calendar gets ready to head into a new year these are haunting questions for an industry that used to be one of the jewels of American harness racing.



Racing at Hollywood Park during the sport's heyday in California (USTA photo)

including a win in the American Pacing Classic. Thirty-one years later, only Cal-Expo in Sacramento remains and its purses are dwarfed by those at the eastern slots tracks and the Meadowlands.

Now, Cal-Expo's future is in jeopardy. Operated by the state-run California Exposition & State Fair, the Cal-Expo Board has declared its intentions to get out of the harness racing business. Unless a new operator can be found, Cal-Expo will run its last race on June 16 and harness racing in the state of California will cease to exist.

"People are nervous and we've seen a larger exodus from here in the last year than we've ever seen," said Alan Kirschenbaum, president of the California Harness Horsemen's Association.

Cal-Expo assumed the operation and management of the harness racing meet at the Sacramento racetrack in March 2008 after the previous operator, Sacramento Harness Association, decided to bow out after declaring bankruptcy. With Los Alamitos having dropped harness racing in 2000, Cal-Expo was all that left, and the state's takeover saved harness racing in California.

Yet, the state-run operation has not well received by horsemen.

"Things just keep going down and down and it just got to be too hard to make a living out there," said trainer Rick Plano, who moved to Florida and turned his California operation over to his son, Luke. "Since the state took it over they kind of ran it into the ground and never put anything back into it. The purses have gone to just about nothing."

According to Kirschenbaum, Cal-Expo was not losing

Harness racing in California used to consist of major venues like Santa Anita, stars like Joe O'Brien and big stakes races. The great Niatross made two appearances at Hollywood Park in 1980,

money, but he said the state feared that that was about to change, the reason why it wanted out.

"We just felt the best thing for us to do was to find an operator on the outside with prior experience," Cal Expo general manager Norb Bartosik told the Sacramento Bee. "It's very difficult for us as a state agency to do what needs to be done."

Kirschenbaum said he is optimistic that a private group will come in and take over the track. He argues that the Sacramento Harness Association only went bankrupt because it has to pay an onerous fee to the state to lease the track and that all other operators have turned a profit.

"I am optimistic and the reason is is that nobody has ever lost money running a well-run race meet in this state," he said. "It's as simple as that. When there was a private operator running Cal Expo back in the mid-nineties they made money every year."

Bobby Johnson, the track's leading trainer said the state's decision to abandon harness racing very well could turn out to be a blessing for the sport.

"With the state, everyone's hands are tied," he said. "They've got a board they have to answer to and the state (continued page 2)

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p,2,1:55.1f; 3,1:47.4 (\$786,055)
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2,1:57.4; 3,1:54 (\$1,495,295)
American Winner-Lawn Tennis
by Ambro Goal
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ART MAJOR



p,2,1:54.3f; 3,1:50.1s; 4,1:48.4
(\$2,727,224)
Artsplace-Perfect Profile by Nihilator
Stud Fee: \$15,000

CRAZED



2,Q1:57; 3,1:52.2-1:53.2f
(\$1,063,059)
Credit Winner-Mary Lou Hall
by Mr Lavec
Stud Fee: \$3,500

ROCK N ROLL HEAVEN



p,2,1:50.2; 3,1:47.3 (\$2,748,818)
Rocknroll Hanover-Artistic Vision
by Artsplace
Stud Fee: \$12,000

ROLL WITH JOE



p,2,1:53.1; 3,1:48.2-'11 (\$1,805,102)
Cam's Card Shark - Classic Wish
by Ambro Emerson
Stud Fee: \$7,000

BETTOR'S DELIGHT



p,2,1:51.3; 3,1:49.4 (\$2,581,461)
Cam's Card Shark-Classic Wish
by Ambro Emerson
Stud Fee: \$14,000 Cdn.
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SHADOW PLAY



p,2,1:57.2; 3,1:48.2f-1:50h; 4,1:47.4
(\$1,549,881)
The Panderosa-Matt's Filly by Matt's Scooter
Stud Fee: \$5,000 Cdn.
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to answer to and they don't want to take any big risks. There's a lot a private operator could do to this place to turn it around and it wouldn't be that hard."



Kirschenbaum is among those looking for someone to come in and save Cal-Expo. He will use the fact that

Cal-Expo has turned a profit in many recent years, but he's also going to have to answer some tough questions. With Indian tribes having a stranglehold on gaming in the state, there's virtually no hope that Cal-Expo will get slots and a shrinking betting handle will no doubt worry potential investors.

Cal-Expo averaged \$775,406 in handle per card in 2010, a decline of 7.4 percent from the previous years. Through November of this year Cal-Expo's handle was off \$9.3 million on the year, but the track had hosted 17 fewer racing cards.

But the numbers don't have Kirschenbaum discouraged.

"It's extremely difficult here, but it's never not been difficult here," he said. "Ever since we left Los Alamitos and have been down to a one track, year-round operation it's been really hard. We live in a state where Indian gaming has been given every advantage and the racetracks have had to exist in a very tough environment. Having said that, we have the advantages that there is not a lot of competition for the betting dollar during the time of night we operate and when the product itself was better our handle was extremely good. We were among the top five tracks in the US in that category. We believe we can return things to those days."

But does anyone else, at least someone with lots of money and a willingness and determination to tackle a tough project? California harness racing must find that person and hand over the reins for the future or else there will be no future at all.

Chris Marino Banned at Pompano Park

By Bill Finley



Chris Marino is out at Pompano

Chris Marino, the leading trainer at Pompano Park, has been told by racing officials there that he will no longer be able to compete at the South Florida racetrack. No reasons have been given for his exclusion.

"What do you want me to say?" Marino said. "They didn't really say anything negative. They just said that this

was in the best interests of Pompano Raceway. Is this really news?"

Marino has 26 winners from 91 starters (28.57 percent) at the current Pompano meet. He leads Peter Pellegrino by two wins. He has 172 wins on the year, including 29 at the Meadowlands, where he was the fourth leading trainer in 2011.

Gural Gives Case The Green Light to Drive at the Meadowlands

By Bill Finley

After a face-to-face meeting with Walter Case Jr., Meadowlands operator Jeff Gural has told the driver he can compete at the East Rutherford track if he can obtain a license from the New Jersey Racing Commission.

Other than a brief stint at Plainridge in 2008, Case, 50, has been inactive since 2003. His career was derailed by a prison term after he stabbed his ex-wife. Case only recently completed the parole portion of his sentence, the reason why he and attorney Jeff Pocaro have taken the first steps toward possible reinstatement.

Case could not continue driving at Plainridge because his parole officer ruled that he could not leave the state of New York, which is no longer an issue.



Walter Case Jr. may resurface at the Meadowlands

Gural's backing is a big plus for Case, but he is far from a sure thing to get a license from the New Jersey Racing Commission.

"This will not be a walk in the park," Pocaro

said. "However, I will point out to the New Jersey Racing Commission that Walter was licensed by the Massachusetts Racing Commission in 2008 and he did drive at Plainridge. So, he is 'licensable.'"

Pocaro said he has already sent in a license application on Case's behalf and expects to meet with New Jersey Racing Commission officials in early January.

According to Pocaro, Gural's biggest concern about letting Case drive at the Meadowlands was his fear that the driver would abandon the New Jersey track for Yonkers, where he was a kingpin in the nineties.

"Case looked Gural in the eye and told him 'if you commit to me, then I will commit to you,'" Pocaro said.

Pocaro said Gural was also worried about Case's habit of kicking horses. The lawyer said that Case promised to use a special sulky that will not allow him to free his feet from the stirrups during a race.

"One step at a time," said Pocaro, "as this will be a lengthy process, state by state, race track by race track. Walter is committed to getting back to driving."

Case has also re-applied to Massachusetts, where he was last licensed in 2008. The USTA is meeting next week consider Case's application. Case plans to also apply to Delaware, Pennsylvania and New York.

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“Like” Heather Moffett on Facebook

Harness racing television personality Heather Moffett needs your help for a good cause. Heather’s goal is to reach 4,000 Facebook ‘likes’ by Jan. 1 in order to earn \$800 for charity, and is currently approximately 350 short. Visit Heather’s Facebook page (www.facebook.com/heathermoffett), or watch the video here: http://www.facebook.com/heathermoffett?sk=app_141855969252530 to learn more, and click the Like button to add your vote to the tally. The charities which stand to profit are Horse Lovers United, which cares for retired racehorses, and Lifetime Wells for Ghana, which drills wells in Africa.



Trainer Tony Alagna



HRU: You were an assistant to Erv Miller, how did that experience contribute to your success today?

TA: Erv was great. Being around him for so long showed me how to run a big stable, and do it effectively. It’s such a difficult thing to do, and Erv is great at it. Having so many horses now, being with Erv really prepared me for what I am doing now.

HRU: You have become a household name the last two years, what do you most attribute your success to?

TA: Obviously Erv (Miller) played a big part. But I have been in this business for twenty years, and one of the first things I learned is success does not come overnight. You need to develop relationships which takes a great deal of time. People want to see you put in the hard work. All of this rolled up led me to Major Bombay, who I feel was the first young horse who kind of really put us on the map. It showed that we were going to be a force to be reckoned with in regards to not just overnight horses, but the younger horses too. It showed we could do it all, start to finish.

HRU: What does Tony Alagna want to accomplish in 2012?

TA: This year is a year that I just want to keep moving forward. We are really building good momentum as a stable. I think we are set up well to have a great year. We have 40 yearlings, and there is a lot of quality in that group. Two years ago we were at \$1.3 Million, this year we’re at \$3.6 Million. Hopefully, we can build on that next year, and I think we have the power to do it.

HRU: What are the long term goals for your career?

TA: I just want to be an all-around good trainer. I want to be known as a guy who can do a little bit of everything. I’d like to show we can perform well with the good young colts in the summer, and also with the big open horses in the winter. Specific individual goals are tough to come up with, but overall, I just want to be a good all around trainer.

Woodbine Report

Friday’s Results

8 Wdb. \$25,000, Pace. FILLIES & MARES, NW \$20,000 LAST 5 STARTS OR NW \$31,000 LAST 10 STARTS. 25.4, 55.3, 1:24.3, 1:38.4, 1:52.4 FT

Blissful Smile (m,8 - Blissfull Hall-Serious Smile-Die Laughing) O-Emerald Highlands Farm. B-Walnut Hall Ltd. T-Tony O’Sullivan. D-Scott Zeron, \$12,500. Lifetime Record: 144-26-25-17, \$826,140.

To view the replay click [here](#)

10 Wdb. \$42,000, Pace. Fillies & Mares Open. 27, 57, 1:25.1, 1:52.4 FT

Warrawee Koine (m, 5-Astreos-My Gal Hall-Cambest) O-Dr, Michael Wilson. B-Warrawee Farm. T-Colin Johnson. D-Jody Jamieson, \$21,000. Lifetime Record: 65-23-8-7, \$513,298

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