

Friday, May 22, 2020

Lawson on return to racing at Woodbine: now is not the time to let our guard down

Horse racing is slated to return to Woodbine Mohawk Park on June 5, but with it comes the added responsibility for the industry to follow COVID-19 safety protocols to the letter to avoid another protracted shutdown.

by Dave Briggs

Jim Lawson said he was incredibly energized the night he learned horse racing was listed in phase one of Ontario's COVID-19 re-opening plan, but now the CEO of the Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) has other reasons his sleep is being tested.

"This resumption of racing is not a ticket to all of a sudden let our guard down," he said, referring to the planned re-opening of live racing on June 5 at Canada's premier standardbred track, Woodbine Mohawk Park. "We have worked so hard, so carefully and so strategically to bring live racing back and I'm so concerned that now that it's back people will think we're passed all of this, but we're not. This virus is still the same threat that it was. We've experienced better numbers because of the good work that everyone has done on physical distancing. (Ontario premier Doug) Ford's government is letting people go ahead on that basis, but we can't take a step backward. That's where I lose sleep right now."

Lawson's message to the industry is simple: Many were desperate for racing to return. Now that it is restarting, every person must abide by the safety protocols and agree to Woodbine's restrictions. One case of COVID-19 at the racetrack is enough to shut down the sport again and who knows when it might be able to return if there is a positive case.

"As soon as you start to open this up, as a result of racing,

Ontario



by definition, you're increasing the risk," Lawson said. "We have to be careful."

Lawson referenced other sports leagues such as Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association that are talking about resuming play, but only if all the players are kept in a virtual bubble in one location until all games are finished. He said the challenge with horse racing is people and horses are coming in from all over the province and then going home.

"I'm very concerned that people start to let their guard

In today's HRU

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down and forget about what got us there. We've done a lot of good things to get us to this point... but as we go back to racing, one single point of failure, whether it's in the driver community or the jockey community or the starting gate community... is going to shut us down," Lawson said.

LEARNING FROM MOHAWK

Fortunately, WEG had something of a test run in March on how to conduct harness racing while applying COVID-19 safety protocols.

"We started to understand the practicalities at Mohawk with horses leaving the paddock and coming back into the paddock after a race... horses arriving and how we can separate out races and post times. There were some really good lessons learned, even after just a couple of days. I think that helps a lot," Lawson said. "There isn't really a playbook or precedent on the harness racing side that there is on the thoroughbred side (established elsewhere by tracks such as Gulfstream that kept racing).

"There's some logistics in the (standardbred) paddock of juggling an entire card of horses. We learned a lot at Mohawk, but it's not like there's anywhere else for us to turn to like calling the people at Gulfstream on the thoroughbred side and saying 'How are you guys doing this?'"

Lawson that quoted famous French philosopher Voltaire.

"Voltaire said, 'Perfect is the enemy of good' and we've just got to get this good to begin with and learn as we go along."

PURSES UNCHANGED FOR 2020

In the more good news department, despite the six-week shutdown, Lawson said he doesn't expect any significant changes to standardbred purses in 2020, but he stressed purses in 2021 and 2022 will likely be impacted by both racing's shutdown and the closure of the casinos.

Now that the Slots at Racetracks Program (SARP) has been eliminated, tracks no longer receive a direct cut of slot revenue, but casinos do provide significant revenue to WEG to lease the gaming space at both Mohawk and Woodbine.

"Woodbine does derive and does rely on the casino ultimately for a good chunk of our revenue. We're tied to the casinos by virtue of our lease," Lawson said. "It was my goal to completely remove ourselves from the government funding program and I think that was a realistic goal. It's still a goal, but the fact that the casinos are going to have a complete dry period, following by a slow period for the foreseeable future, definitely has an impact on Woodbine Entertainment revenue and that income and, accordingly, it's going to take Woodbine Entertainment a lengthier period to



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get back on its feet on this goal of being self-sustaining.

“I don’t know and I don’t want to send off alarm bells in the industry... but Woodbine Entertainment will realize a significant drop in its income in 2021. We’re fine for 2020 and have planned accordingly, but we’re going to have to adjust our business accordingly going forward based on the fact that we’ve got lower income from the casinos for the foreseeable future, which I expect will affect us in 2021 and 2022.”

BETTING \$4-5 MILLION A CARD?

With Mohawk being the first large North American harness track to re-open, Lawson said it could be a great opportunity both for driving handle and exposure.

“I see this as a huge opportunity on the harness racing side,” Lawson said. “I think that we’re going to be the focus of the harness world and I’m hoping that we see nights of four or five million dollars on the harness racing side.

“The caveat of all of that, of course, is that we won’t have wagers at the track, we won’t have wagers at our Champions lounges, of which there are over 60 in the province. We won’t have wagers at the other racetracks, which are also served. So we’re missing that whole distribution network for wagering. We need to – and we’ve certainly been planning it for weeks – get as many people converted to using HPI as possible and that’s one of our challenges.”

RACING ON A MAJOR SPORTS NETWORK?

Lawson also believes horse racing has a strong chance to get on prime time cable television in Canada with sports networks such as TSN looking for live sporting events to broadcast while most sports are still idle.

“We already have a relationship with TSN and we’re working through with them on what it can look like and we’re hoping in the next week or so that we’ll have some good news on a product on TSN,” Lawson said.

“I think it’s an opportunity to showcase both thoroughbreds and standardbred racing on a network and our mindset about it is going to be less about the wager and more about exposing people and showing them the fun and the people in horse racing.”

It’s another potential positive in challenging times, but Lawson said it won’t immediately help the thousands of WEG employees that are laid off and will remain so in the short term.

Though racing will return, Lawson stressed it is being done with as few employees as possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The fact racing will be conducted without spectators means grandstand staff, including pari-mutuel workers, food and beverage staff, custodians, security personnel, etc., won’t be needed back, yet.

“I feel for those people and we’re doing our best to support



Claus Andersen

Racing is scheduled to resume at Woodbine Mohawk Park on June 5 absent spectators and with strict COVID-19 safety protocols in place.

them through the government programs and with benefits, but it's a difficult time for all of those people...It's not a good situation," Lawson said. "We have a large food-and-beverage operation... much like the restaurant business and the catering businesses. A good analogy would be with the banquet business. You just cannot envision in the next few months that we're going to be hosting corporate parties or large gatherings of people. In addition to that group, we've got a lot of people in group sales, we've got a lot of people in hospitality... it goes on and on and on. It's not just food and beverage – it's guest services, mutual tellers, security.... It impacts everything we do. It's very difficult to ramp up when you're closed to spectators. Even if we get permission to open, I'm not so sure that people are going to be rushing back into restaurants. I don't want to be dramatic here, but do we ever go back to a buffet at Mohawk?"

Lawson said an abundance of caution is designed to show the province that horse racing deserves the faith placed in it to re-open in phase one.

"We've followed the lead of the provincial government and I think the fact that we've been singing from the same song sheet as the Premier has given us credibility in terms of how we've shown leadership," Lawson said.

"I spent a lot of my time working with OLG (Ontario Lottery and Gaming corporation) and indirectly with Ministry of Finance, building the case as to why racing could resume. Racing, as you know in this province, isn't really on everyone's radar politically, but it should be because of all the people (employed by it), but you feel like you have to build the case every time," Lawson said.

It has made for a long six weeks for Lawson and others at WEG.

"I can remember like it was yesterday, trying to decide how long to keep going at Mohawk on the Monday without spectators and then another try on the Thursday and then things just started to cave in on us with the regulators not wanting to show up at the track," Lawson said. "It's been crisis management for a couple of months. For me, every morning it's like, 'Wow, what's going to hit today?' This week it was the herpes virus in the backstretch at Woodbine. Then, various things with government and it's just been pretty constant.

"It's been two steps forward, one step back, every step along the way."

THE NEW REALITY

He said racing will be drastically different when it does return and he implores the industry to follow the new rules.

"At this stage, WEG protocols, which have been submitted

and approved by the AGCO (Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario) as the basis for allowing us to proceed with training and racing at both of our racetracks, only allows essential personnel to be present. Those personnel will be strictly accounted for and screened. We are otherwise not allowing people, including our own employees, onto our property including the grandstand areas except on the same basis. There are many factors upon which we have prudently arrived at this decision and we do not expect this to change in the short term. At the same time we completely appreciate and recognize the support of our horse racing community and it will continue to be top of mind for us as circumstances change and allow us to adjust our policies. Thank you for your patience and understanding."

That means people won't be allowed to watch workouts or qualifiers on site, but Woodbine is looking into broadcasting those workouts and qualifiers.

"We're saying, 'Everyone take a deep breath.' We're fortunate to be racing... What we're really trying to do is control this virus and we're a long way from being in the clear on that."

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Harness Racing Update is owned by HRU Publications of Millwood, NY and will publish Fridays and Sundays from fall through late spring. HRU will add Saturday editions early summer through fall, publishing 3 days per week, and will add editions throughout the year as major news breaks.

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Woodbine hoping new Dark Horse app is a game changer

The app uses artificial intelligence to do the handicapping for the users, which WEG is hoping will be a boon to less experienced bettors.

by Dave Briggs

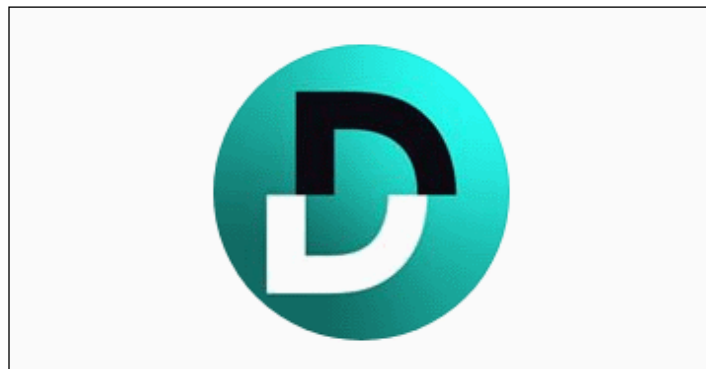
The Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) is planning to celebrate the return of live racing with the launch of a new betting app it thinks will be a game changer.

Dark Horse is an app that employs artificial intelligence to handicap races for the users.

"No one has done anything like this," said WEG CEO Jim Lawson. "Racetracks have often offered handicapping tools and prediction tools, but we're taking it to a whole new level with artificial intelligence. We use the artificial intelligence to parse through past performances to determine probable outcomes. This really mimics the algorithms the computer bettors are using."

Lawson said he hopes one of the benefits is giving smaller bettors the chance to compete with bigger punters using advanced computer systems.

"It's an amazing product. We've eliminated the complication. We've cut right through the betting process and it's pretty fun and engaging because you're seeing all these different bets and bet packages. It's actually an amazing product," Lawson said. "The win percentage is incredibly high.... We've got our fingers crossed that people start to use it."



Lawson said the app will have a soft launch this week. The Android version of the app is available and WEG is hoping the app to be approved by Apple in time for a hard launch in conjunction with the return of racing on June 5. More information is available at www.playdarkhorse.com.

"What you'll see on Dark Horse, based on all this artificial intelligence, is we will produce wagering and betting packages saying, 'What's your risk?' or 'How do you want to do it?' These bet packages almost propose fixed odds, although it's pari-mutuel. We give an expected payout in real time, showing what all these different formulas and betting packages and what we can do. Then you can choose the level of risk, based on the liquidity in the pool. And it parses through the card daily, in terms of the North American cards. It's done separately for A-level tracks, B-level tracks and maiden races. So there's three different theoretical models for how it comes up with the information," Lawson said.

"I hope it's successful for us given all the money we've invested in it, but I hope it's successful for this industry. It could be revolutionary in terms of people having fun and going onto the phone and doing these bets. You can watch the race and this artificial intelligence calculates the outcomes for you and it's really quite an amazing thing."

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Qualifying observations as Scioto Downs kicks off harness racing's return

by Brett Sturman

For the first time in almost two months, live harness racing returns to North America on Friday. Scioto Downs in Ohio will play host to the first harness races in this part of the world since racing ceased at Cal Expo on the first day of April as part of measures taken globally to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

For a track that typically handles only a couple hundred thousand per race card, they'll have the harness racing spotlight to themselves upon return and the expectation is that they should be able to handle well above normal. For the bettor-friendly actions they're taking upon return, they deserve to.

Since the announcement that Ohio tracks were given the go ahead to resume racing operations (albeit without live fans, which is almost normal at most tracks anyway), Ohio has done everything you could possibly expect considering the number of horses that are gearing up ready to race.

Unlike other jurisdictions which have made the inexplicable decision to do away with return qualifiers (looking at you, AGCO) where horses could potentially return with up to six months off without racing as a big screw you to bettors, Ohio has taken the opposite approach.

Since last Saturday, Ohio has been having 16 and 17 race qualifying cards held at pari-mutuel and fair tracks across the state. This includes qualifiers at Scioto, Northfield, Lebanon and the hallowed Delaware County Fairgrounds. Not only that, but all the qualifiers have been streamed live by the Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association and then uploaded to view later so that anyone at any point can watch the races as a handicapping tool. Remarkably, the videos of the races that I watched in preparation for Friday's opening card were at quality levels better than many track simulcast feeds.

What's more is that Scioto was able to secure free programs for not only opening night, but for all three cards across the weekend. Between the complete transparency with not only conducting qualifiers for hundreds of horses in a short period, along with broadcasting all races while providing bettors with free handicapping materials as the first track running, it should entice those to give Scioto a look that otherwise normally wouldn't.

Qualifiers in of themselves are only one piece of the handicapping puzzle, but in this case it's the only sign of recent form that there is to go on. The overwhelming majority of horses on tonight's (May 22) card come off Scioto qualifiers from Saturday 5/16, so with that, here are some visual observations from those races for horses who race tonight:

Race 5 kicks off the Pick-5 (races 5 through 9) as a mid-upper level conditioned race for fillies and mares, and things appear completely up for grabs in the full 10-horse field. #9 JOHN'S BABY GIRL is one of the few that qualified on Monday as opposed to Saturday, but nevertheless couldn't have been more overloaded. She found herself buried in traffic on the rail around the final turn, had a wall of horses in front of her until late in the stretch before she burst through. The qualifying time wasn't as fast as others, but she left racing on a strong note in March; seems to be a possibility as a longshot candidate. #4 LET ME FLOW rallied to be a distant second in her qualifier against a strong winner but I think her finish was more a result of passing tired horses; I'd be inclined to pass if the price is short. Same comment could be said for WESTERN SECRET A in tonight's 4th race. #8 ARRIVAL is another one that won slowly on paper, but visually was more impressive how she rolled off the back of a mare that had first run into the stretch for a measured win. #2 WESTSLUCKYCAM won in 1:51 at Northfield when last seen; let's see how she returns. Qualifier wasn't anything great, but it was won by the likely favorite in tonight's Fillies & Mares Open.

Speaking of which, **race 6** is the fillies and mares open and the horse to beat is the one that had the fastest last quarter of any horse through the 16 qualifiers from last Saturday. In her qualifier, #3 ROSEMARY ROSE was forced wider than she would have liked to have been around the final turn losing momentum, but still gathered up enough steam to reel in a mare that had opened up four lengths after getting first run. Page did chase after her a bit to get home in that fast :26:4 closing quarter and he unsurprisingly sides here for Burke over the #5 SALLY FLETCHER A.

Race 7 is an optional claimer, where the 5-2 morning line favorite #2 I CHOOSE YOU is one of only two horses entered for the \$20,000 claiming tag. I'm guessing she gets programmed favoritism off the fast 1:51 mile from Dover in March and the high percentage barn, but that qualifier was just fair. #4 PRINCESS ROUGAROU despite being caught by ROSEMARY ROSE (race 5) raced better, but when all is said and done it looks like the one to beat is #8 LIBBY'S IDEA. Post 8 shouldn't matter for Burke and Page. Crushed them in that qualifier and could clear to the lead in a matter of strides.

In **race 10**, the early 5-2 favorite is #5 NEVER SAY UNCLE who makes his first start since last July. Around this time last year, he was trotting 1:54 miles over this track which would obviously be good enough but now returns off a lone qualifier in 1:59 at Spring Garden. The next two contenders in wagering squared off last week in the same qualifier. In that race, TRUMPETS (#1 tonight) tipped from the pocket and had the entire length of the stretch to go by #4 MANNY L but couldn't do so. With Merriman aboard, seems like he'll be going right to the front again; the one to catch.

Race 11, the first half of the late double is another that looks wide open and some of the favorites look vulnerable if

you base it solely on the qualifiers. #1 TELL ME LIKE IT IS is the 2-1 favorite from the rail as she paced the fastest qualifier of these last week yet couldn't gain at all in the stretch despite a perfect trip. If anything, was lucky to somehow hold for second. Conversely, #4 ARTINI was involved in the slowest pacing qualifier last Saturday, but grinded his way first over from 6th starting at the three-eighths and held together well. He's been off since December but Merriman driving gives confidence; possible longshot. #8 ROCK THE BABY had it all her own way in her qualifier this spot won't be as easy; probable play-against.

One other note that you might find of interest, a horse named SECTIONLINE BIGRY finished 5th in race 11 of his 5/16 qualifier. His chart from that race doesn't show it, but it looked to me like he broke stride briefly three different times around the final turn. If not for those miscues he almost certainly would have won in my opinion, and he's in-to-go on Saturday as the 7-2 second choice. The 5-2 favorite in that race is My Hero Ron. They were both in that same qualifier and SECTIONLINE BIGRY was better; we'll see what happens on Saturday and if he offers any value.

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GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVE



with CHRIS LOMON

The challenges and triumphs of rising star Brandon Parker

by Chris Lomon

Brandon Parker repeats the question aloud.

"The toughest challenge?" asks the standardbred driver from Monticello, NY, before he takes a short pause. "I would say mental illness."

The 21-year-old rising standardbred star is a soft-spoken young man of few words. When he talks, he does so in a measured, thoughtful manner.

He's also honest.

Not in an in-your-face, tell-it-like-it-is way. Instead, his candor comes across as earnest and amicable.

That openness yields a refreshing response to a query that can oftentimes elicit cliché answers.

"Dealing with depression and anxiety, taking medication every morning, speaking with a therapist, then focusing on the horse racing... it's difficult, but I'm managing."

And he's managing well.

Support comes from family and friends. Serenity is found in



Courtesy Brandon Parker

Driver Brandon Parker, 21, is coming off a career best year.

the sulky.

Parker is grateful to have both in his life.

"I get a huge amount of support from a lot of people. They make me look forward to the next day, and make me think, 'What else can I do tomorrow to make them excited and happy about what I do?'"

Then there are the horses.

Well before his first pari-mutuel drive, a second-place finish with 25-1 shot Histoire Eternelle at Monticello on May 9, 2017, Parker had found his calling.

The son of standardbred driving legend Billy "Zeke" Parker, who recorded most of his 11,311 career wins at Monticello, felt a connection with pacers and trotters at a very early age.

At six, he started hanging around his father's barn. He was

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jogging horses by the time he was 12. At 14, he began watching races – lots of them – and soon discovered he was destined for a life in the race bike.

In 2017, his first year of driving, "Lil Zeke" recorded 448 starts. He posted a mark of 42 wins, 56 seconds and 57 thirds and a UDRS of .206.

Parker's efforts didn't go unnoticed.

He was named the 2017 Rising Star recipient by the Monticello-Goshen chapter of USHWA.

Since the recognition, he hasn't slowed down a fraction.

In 2018, Parker won 57 races. The number jumped to 92 the following year.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary halt to live racing across North America, he had won 47 races, and was well on pace to besting his career-best numbers from 2019.

"It was tough to have to stop, but you just kept the hope that we'd get back soon. I've been working at the track for my dad, and others. I'm making sure that I sit behind at least one horse a day, either jogging them, training them, or just putting them away. Being around the horses keeps my focus on them and how happy that makes me."

On the final night before the call was made to press pause on live racing in New York, Parker won two of his seven drives at Monticello on March 12.

Both came with horses trained by his father.

"Winning for my dad never gets old. When I see his smile when I come back to the paddock, it feels like the greatest accomplishment."

The younger Parker is now looking to pick up where he left off.

"That's what I'm trying to do. I don't want this to be a change in fortune from where we stopped. I want to get back to where I was and keep on improving."

Constantly developing his skill-set remains a top priority.

He hasn't forgotten the words his father shared with him about the craft.

"One thing that has stuck was my dad telling me, 'If you're not learning, you're doing something wrong.' For me, it doesn't matter if you're a 20-year-old driver or a 50-year-old driver, there is always something to learn. Everyone does things differently, but you have to keep an open mind in this business. My goal is to always keep improving."

Parker, who has also had success working for accomplished horseman Larry Stahlbaum, repeats a particular focal point in his approach as a key to early successes.

"It's just keeping that open mind. I work for a lot of different people, and I drive alongside great drivers every day. I watch what they do, and when the races are over, I go home and watch replays. I study that film and go over what I did that day."

A critical eye is tempered by an ability to see the good in what he accomplishes.

"Most of the things I look for in myself is patience and right timing... where I didn't over drive. I waited and I made the right moves. I've driven in races where I thought I drove well and finished second. I go home and watch the replay and then I can pick out three different times that I should have done this or that, or shouldn't have done this or that. I try to study it a lot."

Attention to detail, nearly daily homework, and natural talent holding the reins has added up to an impressive start to Parker's career.

He's eager to tack on more victories to the 241 he's accumulated to date.

"Even with the way racing has been affected by the coronavirus, I want to go past the number of wins I had last year. That's my goal."

Beyond that life on the racetrack, Parker is embracing the time he gets to spend with family and friends.

He plays basketball. He listens to music. He draws. Last spring, he was on a co-ed softball team.

And if he ever needs a reminder of the many people he has in his corner, Parker knows all it takes is a click, text, call or conversation.

"I'm on social media a lot, and I couldn't appreciate my fans, my friends and my family any more than I do. They always make me look forward to tomorrow."

As do the horses.

"To sit behind an amazing creature like that, I'm lucky to be able to do this for a living. Sometimes I forget I get paid to do it. That's when you know you love what you do. And I do."

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Which horses will grab the final Elitloppet spots?

by Thomas Hedlund

The Elitloppet at Solvalla is approaching. Sunday, May 31 is the day when 16 high quality trotters from, normally, all over the world, will chase eternal glory and a winning prize of \$311,000.

This is a special year, for known reasons and discussions among harness racing fans mean that this year's edition of Elitloppet is the worst in many years. By worst they surely mean the quality of trotters that already have been invited – or qualified – for the big race at Solvalla.

But it's an unfair to say the Elitloppet lacks a great class this year. Under the circumstances, it's pretty hard to find better horses that are ready for the two-heat mile race in Stockholm a week from Sunday and there has also been a couple of qualification races where all good horses have had their chances to reach a spot in Elitloppet.

The following horses are currently invited and ready for Elitloppet 2020:

Chief Orlando (Finland)

Eliau Web (Finland)

Looking Superb (Norway)

Vivid Wise As (Italy)

Cokstile (Italy)

Attraversiamo (Sweden)

Tae Kwon Deo (Sweden)

Makethemark (Sweden)

Missile Hill (Sweden)

Sorbet (Sweden)

Earl Simon (Sweden, France)

By all means, there are horses that are missing if one chases the very best trotters from the world. But at this very moment, there are not many other horses that can replace the ones that already have their invitation for the race. French trotters such as Bold Eagle and Cleangame would be

attractions at Solvalla, but they both met Earl Simon in Caen last week and none of them impressed more than the winner from Jarmo Niskanen's stable. So Earl Simon must be considered the most interesting French trotter over the mile at this point.

Italian trotter Vivid Wise As won the Criterium de Vitesse in Cagnes-sur-Mer earlier this spring and has earned his place in Elitloppet. An uncertain performance in the last race in Sweden makes him a little bit more hard to count on at Solvalla next week, but two weeks ago, the son of Yankee Glide was the first choice to win Elitloppet at many betting companies in Europe.

Five spots remain before the field is set and there are several trotters that are knocking on the entry door of Elitloppet.

Peter Untersteiner's Heart Of Steel (Cantab Hall) had a great performance in \$73,500 Copenhagen Cup in Denmark last Sunday. Despite a trip outside of heavy favorite and world champion trotter Zacon Gio, Heart Of Steel fought bravely and held quick finisher Milligan's School behind him by a neck.

Heart Of Steel is one of the more interesting horses that Solvalla's sports manager Anders Malmrot has in mind when he will get the Elitloppet field together.

Milligan's School's runner up performance in Denmark puts him in a spot where he must be one of the hottest alternatives, but Stefan Melander also has another well merited sprinter in Courant Stable's Disco Volante. And what about Green Manalishi?

The winner of the \$62,300 Gold final in Gävle Saturday will receive an invitation for the Elitloppet and it's an exciting field of 10 horses that will try to claim their spots at Solvalla, respectively. One, maybe two horses, will be set for Elitloppet after that race on Saturday afternoon and after that, three or four other horses will complete the field for Solvalla's biggest race for the year.

Propulsion is not mentioned, yet. The American bred 9-year-old trains with the Elitloppet as the main objective, but so far, trainer Daniel Redén hasn't given the thumb-up whether he will race the Muscle Hill son for the fifth consecutive year.

Milliondollarrhyme is another horse that knocks on the door for Elitloppet 2020. His merits so far this year are by far not enough to take him for granted at Solvalla next weekend, but his progress last year among the best trotters in Europe in addition to his high level capacity makes him a horse that ought to be guaranteed among the 16.

Horses that race in Gävle Saturday afternoon (winner gets an invitation to Elitloppet):

One mile

Conrads Rödluva – Örjan Kihlström

Billie de Montfort – Björn Goop

Baron Gift – Rickard Svantedt

Racing Mange – Joakim Lövgren

Zarenne Fas – Rikard N Skoglund

Diamanten – Erik Adielsson

Ferrari B.R. – Per Oleg Midtfjeld

Snowstorm Hanover – Jorma Kontio

Rose Run Sydney – Mats E Djuse

Minnestads el Paso – Rebecca Dahlén

Nine-year-old Billie de Montfort, with 105 lifetime starts and \$2,324,297 in her bank account, is by far the most merited horse in the race and she could very well be invited to Elitloppet even if she doesn't win this particular race on Saturday. Trainer Sébastien Guarato has another, more interesting trotter in his barn and it's not a wild guess that his Prix d'Amérique winner Face Time Bourbon will be aimed for Elitloppet 2021.

The hot 10 ahead of Elitloppet 2020:

The winner in Gävle (see horses above)

Milliondollarrhyme

Propulsion

Disco Volante

Milligan's School

Heart Of Steel

Mindyourvalue W.F.

Billie de Montfort

Cyber Lane

Green Manalishi

If someone outside this list grabs a spot in Elitloppet, it would be a big upset and the last invitations will take place on Saturday night, after the race in Gävle. Draws for the two heats in the Elitloppet come to pass on Sunday afternoon, so within 23 hours, the last five horses must be invited.

Helgafell – a winner in France

Vincennes in Paris raced on May 19 and 3-year-old dominant Helgafell (Charly du Noyer) was back as a winner. Philippe Allaire trains the promising 3-year-old and Eric Raffin sent the son of Charly du Noyer to the front at an early stage in \$93,200 Prix Kalmia and the duo won easily in mile rate 1:58.4 over 1.6 miles.

Helgafell has dominated the French "H-crop" both as a

2-year-old and this year and Philippe Allaire's trotter has seven wins in ten starts in his career so far.

But harness racing in Paris closed again after the race card on Tuesday afternoon. Paris and the region around the French capital is considered as a red zone, which means that all sorts of horse racing had to be cancelled on Wednesday and indefinitely. Vincennes, Enghien, plus racetracks in Lyon and Vichy have to cancel all their race cards. There is a possibility that some events can be moved to tracks in Normandie instead, but no decision has been announced regarding that matter, yet.

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Thoughts on Burke, a revised Triple Crown, time trials and the best crop of standardbreds ever foaled

by Ron Gurfein

Tidbits: I have been inundated with emails about why this individual or that one hasn't been nominated to the Hall Of Fame. It becomes similar to the Pete Rose question. Where does the vetting committee draw the line?

If Alan Leavitt can quote Friedrich Nietzsche in these pages I can quote Jesus Christ.

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Unfortunately, in our sport, the line is slightly bent when investigating certain people.

Before I was nominated to the Hall of Fame, a member of the screening committee called and quizzed me on a Banamine positive I received 35 years prior to the call. This gives you an idea of how intrusive, as well as petty, the system was at the time. To clear the air I was forced to explain that the spectrograph (the device that tells you what drug and how much) was off kilter and there were 11 positives in Liberty Bell that night, including Stanley and Vernon Dancer and Jimmy Larente. I doubt anyone called Stanley and asked about it prior to his nomination.

The bottom line is everyone makes mistakes, no one is perfect. Judge all people the same way and forgive minor indiscretions. Great talent should not be denied a place in the history of the sport because of an error in judgement.

* * *

AMAZING: I have not gotten one call or email of a DEXTER

siting in a month. You KEYSTONE KOPS are failing me.

* * *

Looks like the shortened season will jump start Aaron Merriman with his dominance of two of the three tracks opening this weekend. He is missing mounts in only a few races out of all the events at Northfield (Q) and Scioto. It couldn't happen to a nicer more talented kid. My best wishes.

* * *

Someone of interest emailed me a confidential letter asking what I would do if he gave me serious information about integrity in our sport. I will keep him nameless at his request.

I promise if I am privileged to be in receipt of anything important enough to clean up the sport I will personally contact the proper authority. If you see something say something and you have my word I will run with it till it is proven right or wrong.

The FBI and the Gural organization did a stellar job, however in this writer's opinion it was just the tip of the iceberg. There is still a dearth of Dexter wannabes out there doing evil all over the sport and we all must keep on top of it.

All I want for Christmas is a few EPO positives that stick that will level the playing field immediately.

With a little more FBI work, I will put my colors back on and unretire. I am tired of sitting on the sidelines and going to war without exotic drugs appeals to me greatly.

I think I would like to train 12 2-year-olds and I promise I will not give up my column. Anyone with interest email me (address at the bottom of this column).

* * *

I have heard a lot of dumb things in my life, but a decision in Delaware this week may top them all.

The state has decided that they will open the casinos for gambling but the tracks must have racing without fans in the stands.

Don't get me wrong I definitely agree with racing without fans but why would they think opening casinos was advisable. If it was Illinois, I could fully understand but Delaware?

Anonymous asks (I did this because he asked me not to print his name as have so many that asked similar questions about Ron Burke). I know Ron Burke has hundreds of horses and is going to win a lot of races but I see this guy get a horse and improve the lifetime record by three seconds. How is that possible without PEDs? It seems to me Mickey Burke retired after too many positive tests. Is that true?

NO NO AND NO. All you are doing is promoting more conspiracy theories.

Ron Burke has a method of training far different than the average trainer. If he takes a horse from a trainer that is very soft on a horse and put the horse into his rigorous system, if the horse can adapt, the sky is the limit. I don't swear for anyone, but I would bet money there are no designer drugs in the Burke barn. I can understand his program for a guy with 200 horses not for a trainer with 10. The process is similar to the great athletes of our time. Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan were gym rats they pushed themselves to the very limit day in and day out. They were just more fit than the competition.

Ronnie does the same thing with his horses. Some train faster than they race. They are as tight as you can make a horse.

As for Mickey, I doubt he knows much about designer drugs. Like me, he is quite old and raced horses when the vets treated them with lots of legal stuff. If he had some positives, guaranteed they were a veterinarian's error. As for retiring, he is still around all the time. He just handed the reins to the kids.

Paul Brown asks: The thoroughbred Triple Crown has been intact for over 100 years. Why because of the shuffle of dates did they change the distance of the mile and a half classic Belmont Stake to a mile and an eighth?

The answer is very simple. The regulating committee realized that in maintaining their June date they have turned the series upside down. That is, the race has moved from last to first. That said, the Belmont is without question the toughest race of the trio when it comes to endurance. That long stretch at the end of a mile and a half grind has done in some of the finest horses to look through a bridle.

Now think from a Baffert point of view. I want to win the race but do I want to string my colt out one and a half miles in June with the Derby and Preakness to follow?

Using their heads they knew guys like Baffert, Brown and Pletcher would likely pass the race with their top tier horses and wait for the mile and a quarter Kentucky Derby.

Considering the Derby to be more relevant to a champion's life they couldn't risk it.

Therefore, by shortening the distance, and having the event go more than two months before the Derby (as is planned today) they will have a myriad of entries. At the original distance, I could imagine four or five in the starting gate.

All in all it's going to be the easiest Triple Crown in history as instead of racing all three events in a five-week period, The Belmont is first on June 6, The Derby follows on Sept. 5 and lastly the Preakness on Oct. 3.

In that scenario, there are 17 weeks from beginning to end. Much more logical to this writer and possibly some good will come out of this major dilemma.

Craig Wilson asks: I just read an interesting article on the best thoroughbred crop from 1970 that included Secretariat, Forego, Mr. Prospector and Sham. What year was the best crop of harness horses foaled?

I remember lots of rivalries in the pacing ranks especially Albatross and Nansemond as I was training for Bill Camp Jr. at the time but my answer would naturally land on the trotting side. This is just off the top of my head and I am sure there are lots of fans out there that will have better answers but there were to crops that had amazing depth — foals of 1969 and 1993.

In foals of '69 there was Super Bowl, Songcan, Delmonica Hanover, Flush, Spartan Hanover and Quick Work.

In the foals of '93 was Continentalvictory, Mr. Vic, Lindy Lane, Act of Grace and Kramer Boy.

Joel Kravet asks: I have a two part question. I watch European racing and the drivers tend to sit outside three deep at times, which truly doesn't work in America. How do they get away with it? Why do horses warm up so little before a race these days? They used to warm up three times.

In answer to part one, the racing is totally different in Europe. For the most part, they race at longer distances and they are not going full tilt every quarter like they do in the U.S. When the quarters are soft it gives the horse a chance to relax and gain his breath. You won't see many three deep in a mile event. Also of note is they race many more horses per event in Europe. Can you picture the Prix d'Amerique with 20 horses single file? It would be ridiculous they are forced to double and triple tear. I have seen horses literally seven and

eight wide on the final turn in Paris.

As to part two, so much is different in racing and training procedures than back in the day. Warm ups are just another part of the equation. I am not sure if it was a practical change or came from laziness. It is true that today's horse is slimmer and more athletic and probably doesn't need the additional work, but to me it was a radical change. There was a time when the transition started that I was jogging two miles and going a trip around 2:40 and came back a few races later and went a mile in 2:18 and my horse was ready. The guy next to me jogged his horse a mile and a half and sent him to the races. I asked some of the younger trainers how they came up with this new method and to be perfectly honest their answer made sense. The horses are on the track so long during the post parade and scoring down and then all the milling around waiting for the start that it is enough to loosen them up.

While on the subject, when is the last time you saw a horse walked and watered after jogging or training?

To me, the best example of how streamlined the sport has become and how many shortcuts have become normal procedure is that there is only one tack trunk for every three or four horses OMG. Maybe it's social distancing.

Tom Santoro asks: I remember when Niatross time trialed. Both the harness and thoroughbred world was watching. Do you think speed is no longer important? Why don't trainers use time trails anymore?

When time trials were at their most popular most of racing was on smaller racetracks. The most prestigious events took place at Yonkers, Roosevelt, Liberty Bell, Brandywine and Blue Bonnets.

One mile pari-mutuel meetings were rare. Hollywood Park in California and The Red Mile for two weeks. Springfield, DuQuoin and Indianapolis were each open for a few days. The emergence of the Meadowlands changed all that and many horses, especially fillies, had months to achieve fast records rather than ship to the Red Mile for a time trial that was quite expensive. The primary reason for a time trial was to make a pedigree page look better and I am not so sure that any horseman really paid any attention to them at all.

Today, they are truly not of any value because the new pedigree pages include beaten times which shows the fastest time recorded by a horse in a losing effort. It gives a buyer an idea how fast a horse can really go. My opinion is these times are faster than a time trial.

I don't know if it's the virus or boredom but you have been

wonderful with letters and questions for the past three months. Good luck to all who resume racing this week and next and please be careful.

Listen to the doctors guidelines, they are definitely not an end all but will surely lessen your chances of contracting the bug. Let's all hope this transition back to normalcy is smooth with no ill effects.

Horse racing is such a non-invasive business and with the horses and caretakers on farms far from crowds, it should be a chip shot to start up immediately.

Unfortunately, like everything else in 2020, it involves politics. What are some of these governors thinking? Some act like they never passed seventh grade.

Please REMEMBER all that happened to us when you visit the ballot box in November. The guilty will pay.

Good hunting and have a wonderful week.

Have a question for The Guru?

Email him at GurfTrot@aol.com.

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When harness racing returns, the public deserves a monetary welcome

by Frank CotoLO

After the long, strenuous global lockdown, harness meets will emerge from the silence with thundering hoofbeats. Horses and horsemen will be ready to compete again with no problems; they were working out during the absence of pari-mutuel racing in preparation for North America's 2020 re-opening.

The public will also be ready for the re-opening of racing action. Even with whatever social-distancing restrictions are in play, the two audiences that support raceway business will be shooting from the traps, so to speak, with near reckless abandon.

The virtual betting audience will be the only "attendance" during the first phase of the "Canada Blueprint" for racing to continue. They will be excited to rejoin their pari-mutuel competitors even though most will participate within the confines of the recent lockdown. By then they will be worn out binging on prestige-television series and movies, bored, in fact, with passive entertainment. Firing up their computers or mobile apps, the "outside attendance," so to speak, will be locked and loaded for action.

The blueprint's other phases will involve a live audience. But, for the immediate returning fans, bettors or both, raceway administrations need to pay special attention. Do not for a moment rely on bettors' anticipation to bring business back. A flagrant display of welcoming needs to be concocted. In other words--beware, because the action on the track and betting connected to it is not enough to rely upon. To truly celebrate and thank the public for returning, they must be greeted with gifts.

Let's focus on the best kind of gifts to show your audience appreciation — cash. In the case of the first phase, of course, it should be virtual cash, with as much potency as if each member of the audience was handed legal tender. Ordinarily, free money is always received with open hands, but it is an extra special gift these days, considering the situation that

stopped bettors from action in the first place.

Plus, due to the pandemic, many people have been (and may still be) out of work and short of the usual cash at hand they used to wager. For that, along with accumulated emotional disturbances, they may be a little shy betting what they did when they felt solvent. Free money is addressing the problem with generosity. It is a perfect time for any raceway to produce a unique stimulus program.

Alternative Actions does not have all of the details for such programs. As usual, though, we offer suggestions upon which your marketing department can build upon.

One super device to give away cash is the voucher; good for betting at your track only. There is not a person alive who would turn down vouchers worth any amount at a pari-mutuels track. Free money is free money. Your marketing department probably already has the digital means to get such credit into the hands of virtual bettors (some form of email coupon or special code, as used in Internet promotions for discount subscriptions and special reduced prices for this or that product) They probably also know how the voucher can be cashed.

Yes, cashed. That is a key component to voucher promotions--never call them vouchers. Call them "CASH" or any word identifiable with actual money. Then, personalize the track tender in promos and ads. At Delaney Downs, our go-to fictional raceway for example presentations, we could call them "Delaney Dollars."

Important, also, is that Delaney Dollars [sic] themselves are free. This is not a common lottery, where everyone gets a voucher but only a few are worth cash. It's the ultimate give-away deal. It's free money. All anyone has to do is claim it in accordance to any rules you provide (so much a week or capped at a certain amount for the meet, etcetera).

Promote to the public that all vouchers guarantee cash. Put whatever limits you want on the value(s) of the track cash but do not be cheap, because the most important part of all this is that the voucher value only has one destination--the betting pools. The cash amounts may only be used when betting at your track, so they incite more bets, larger ones even, for everyone using them--and be sure of one thing--everyone will use them. Sure, it's a rebate, but it benefits the common betting public and the track.

And for sure, when the pandemic smoke has cleared, after you end the promo, those who took advantage of the track's generous cooperation will not forget about it. They will bring you business lined with loyalty, which will be reflected in your future handle and a lasting relationship with the public.

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HRU FOAL OF THE WEEK

Foal of the Week

Vicki Wright

This Bettors Delight colt — foaled on April 27 in New Jersey — is the first foal out of Shez All Rock A, a mare with an impeccable race record Down Under of 10-1-0 in 11 starts, and a mark of 1:51f. She earned some \$448,000 on the track and won the New South Wales Oaks and Victoria Oaks in Australia, before moving over to New Zealand and winning the New Zealand Oaks and the New Zealand Breeders Crown. All four are Group 1 races. Shez All Rock A was the 3-year-old filly of the year in both Australia and New Zealand.

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Midwest June Mixed Sale cancelled

The Midwest June Mixed Sale slated for June 22 at the Michiana Event Center in Shipshewana, IN has been cancelled due to lack of entries related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The company is looking ahead to its annual November Midwest Mixed Sale, to be held Nov. 24, 2020,

—Midwest Auction Company

Pepsi North America Cup rescheduled for Aug. 29 at Woodbine Mohawk Park

Woodbine Entertainment is excited to announce that the \$1 million Pepsi North America Cup for 3-year-old pacers is scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 29 at Woodbine Mohawk Park in Milton, ON.

The eliminations will be held the week prior on Saturday, Aug. 22.

Originally scheduled for June 20, the 37th Pepsi North America Cup was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2020 Woodbine Mohawk Park season was suspended on March 19 and is now set to resume without spectators on Friday, June 5.

“Mohawk Park in the fall is always packed full of action and now we are adding our signature event, the Pepsi North America Cup, to the end of the summer schedule which will only add even more excitement heading into the fall stakes season,” said Jim Lawson, CEO, Woodbine Entertainment.

Woodbine Entertainment will continue to follow the most updated direction from Government and public health officials as it relates to spectators attending events. For the latest regarding fan participation with the 37th Pepsi North America Cup, stay tuned to Woodbine.com/mohawk for updates.

—Jamie Dykstra / Woodbine Entertainment Group

Ohio Sires Stakes revised 2020 schedule

The Ohio Standardbred Development Fund Commission (OSDFC) has approved revisions to the 3-year-old divisions of the 2020 Ohio Sires Stakes schedule. The first legs of the OSS series for 3-year-olds — originally scheduled to take place on May 1 and 3 at Miami Valley Raceway — were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The revised schedule is as follows:

- June 12 — 3-Year-Old Pacing & Trotting Fillies Leg 1 — Scioto Downs
- June 13 — 3-Year-Old Pacing & Trotting Colts Leg 1 — Northfield Park
- June 26 — 3-Year-Old Pacing & Trotting Colts Leg 2 — Scioto Downs
- June 27 — 3-Year-Old Pacing & Trotting Fillies Leg 2 — Northfield Park
- July 11 — 3-Year-Old Trotting Colts Leg 3 — Scioto Downs

The reminder of the original schedule for sophomores remained unchanged:

- July 4 — 3-Year-Old Pacing Fillies Leg 3 — Scioto Downs
- July 10 — 3-Year-Old Trotting Fillies Leg 3 — Northfield Park
- July 18 — 3-year-Old Pacing Colts Leg 3 — Scioto Downs

For more information on the Ohio Sires Stakes or to download a copy of the revised schedule, please visit <http://www.racingohio.net/OSDF.html>.

Kimberly Rinker, Ohio Standardbred Development Administrator

Delaware Standardbred Breeder's Fund races at Harrington

The 3-year old races for the DSBF first and second legs at Harrington will be pushed back one week from the original schedule which means they will begin on Monday, June 22. The finals which are normally held on Governor's Day at the Delaware State Fair will now be held the week of July 6. Purses will remain as advertised. Legs are \$20,000 and the Finals are \$100,000. If consolations are held they will be \$15,000. A printed schedule will be mailed to each eligible.

Qualifying at Harrington will be available for DSBF eligibles only on Wednesday, June 10. They must meet the Fund standards (2:06 for pacers and 2:09 for trotters) and show a clean charted line within 60 days of entering to race

the first leg. If they don't make it on the 10th they will be able to enter for the regular qualifying day of Wednesday after Harrington opens on June the 15th. There will be health protocols in affect so please check with the track.

Call Kevin Mack and or Mark Short at the Harrington Race Office (302) 398-7223 or 5970. Judy Davis-Wilson can be reached at (302) 359-3630 for specific DSBF issues.

—Judy Davis-Wilson

AGCO return to racing, temporary rule amendments

To prepare for the return to racing, the AGCO is actively reviewing Ontario's horse racing rules and regulations to ensure responsible measures are taken to help contain the spread of COVID-19. Our racing officials have also worked with a number of industry stakeholders including racetrack management, horsepersons' associations, veterinarians, and wagering bodies to seek input and address concerns related to the start of racing.

As a result of these discussions, and pursuant to s. 2 of the [Horse Racing Licence Act, 2015](#) and the Rules of Racing, the Registrar will temporarily amend a number of rules in order to accommodate the return to racing and ease industry burden, while also ensuring welfare for equine and human athletes and other racing participants. The AGCO will closely monitor the impacts of these temporary changes to determine how long these measures will be in effect and to ensure they are meeting their desired outcomes. The AGCO will be flexible in the event that any of the measures identified requires further amendment in order to uphold the health and safety of horse racing participants and racehorses.

In addition, the AGCO will continue to work to release additional changes that pertain to racing activities in the coming weeks [on their website](#).

—AGCO

Confirmed cases of EHV-1 at Woodbine Racetrack: monitoring and containment measures in place

The Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) has confirmed that two horses residing at Woodbine Racetrack have tested positive for the neurotropic strain of EHV-1. Both horses are 2-year-old thoroughbred horses that resided in Barn 12 at Woodbine.

The horses were transported from Woodbine to the Ontario Veterinary College for testing and treatment on Saturday May 16, 2020 after showing neurological symptoms, along with a third horse that subsequently tested negative. The AGCO received the results late on Saturday May 16, 2020.

The AGCO has directed that four additional horses residing in Barn 12 at Woodbine be isolated as a precaution. One of the four horses has been isolated because it resided near the two positive horses. The three other horses have fever symptoms but have otherwise not shown signs consistent with EHV-1.

The health and safety of horses and of all people involved in the sport of horse racing is the AGCO's top priority. Due to the infectious nature of this disease, the AGCO has ordered the implementation of various infectious disease protocols to protect our equine athletes. The following measures are now in effect:

- In order to determine whether the disease has spread to horses in other barns, no horses are to exit Woodbine Racetrack without AGCO approval until further notice. This restriction will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.
- No horse is allowed in or out of Barn 12 until further notice, including for training, except for emergency veterinary treatment or to be isolated. This restriction will be reviewed, based on the progression of the disease.
- Only essential people shall enter Barn 12.
- All horses stabled at Woodbine must have their temperatures taken and recorded visibly on the horse's stall door for twice daily inspection. Trainers with horses that have clinical signs consistent with EHV-1 infection (including fever of 101.5 F/38.5 C or higher) or respiratory signs (cough, nasal discharge, and/or neurological signs) must immediately report these findings to their veterinarian.
- Equine dentistry is not permitted, except for emergencies.
- Only ponies housed in the same barn will be allowed to pony horses.

Horsepeople who had horses at Woodbine Racetrack within the last seven days should monitor their horses for any signs of illness.

Horsepeople are reminded to remain vigilant and institute appropriate biosecurity measures and should consult their veterinarians for advice.

To ensure best practices are in place to contain the disease, the AGCO received input from the infectious disease expert Dr. Scott Weese from the University of Guelph and worked closely with Woodbine management, veterinarians, and horse

people.

The AGCO will continue to closely monitor the situation and any further developments will be reported. EHV-1 cannot be spread to humans and is entirely unrelated to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information, or to speak with Dr. Chambers, please call: **289-237-3922**

—*Dr. Adam Chambers / AGCO manager of veterinary services*

Dancer's resolution emphasizes need to safely reopen Meadowlands

As shuttered sectors of New Jersey's economy begin inching back to life with more outdoor activities approved, such as horseback riding, Assemblyman Ron Dancer has sponsored a resolution supporting the Meadowlands Racetrack to resume horse racing, initially without spectators.

"With a proper plan in place, the Meadowlands Racetrack should be allowed to operate, especially with Governor Cuomo announcing the re-opening of all New York racetracks without fans effective June 1," said Dancer

(R-Ocean). "By resuming horseracing, the gaming and racing industries would be able to generate revenue while stimulating our economy from Internet wagering within the State, as well as, simulcasting the races to other states that have already approved the return of horse racing."

He noted that the industry supports 13,000 jobs and has led to the preservation of more than 175,000 acres of farmland and open space in New Jersey.

"We cannot let the gaming and racing industry fall to the wayside and must ensure they can reopen in the safest way possible," concluded Dancer. "This resolution would do just that and keep one of New Jersey's staple industries afloat."

The resolution supports the Equine Center at Rutgers University and the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey proposal to safely phase in the return of horseracing to the Meadowlands Racetrack with the "trifecta" health-related protocols of social distancing, hand sanitizing and face coverings.

—*Courtney Stafford / PR consultant SBOANI*

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