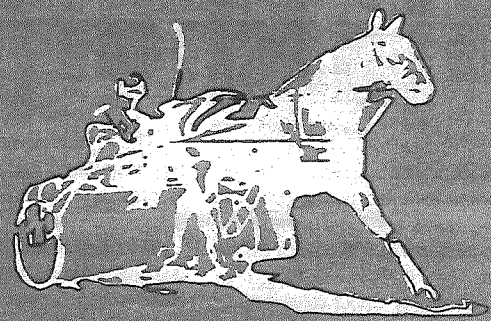


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INDUSTRY TO PREPARE MASSIVE BACKLASH AGAINST NEW POLICY

By **ANDREW GEORGIU**

TABCORP and Government officials have agreed to close a controversial betting loophole, which enabled punters to cancel wagers on harness racing events after a race has started, as of next Monday (April 4).

The move, championed by Gaming and Racing Minister Grant McBride, will prevent some punters from gaining a perceived unfair advantage over others and manipulating betting pools, however, industry heavyweights are up in arms with regard to the total lack of consultation and the significant downturn the move will have on vital TAB turnover.

It was reported that bets totaling in the thousands of dollars were being cancelled up to 10 seconds after the start of a race, in many cases, because a horse has lost its chance at the start of the event.

This in turn caused fluctuations in harness racing betting pools. Currently, harness racing is the only code which allows such a loophole.

The industry, along with TABCorp, will introduce a new system which will give punters the chance to cancel bets up to 25 seconds after horses have begun to move up in the score up. The '25 second rule' is being reviewed, however, in the lead up to Monday's implementation of the new rules.

"This new model was agreed on by government and harness racing officials at a meeting last week and is designed to close betting earlier in an attempt to prevent pool manipulation," TAB Spokesperson, Peter Fletcher said.

"There have been cases where the existing loophole, which allows you to cancel bets after the start of a race, has seen the system abused and caused unusual pool fluctuations.

"The start of the 25 seconds will be after the horses score up, as a group. The triggering of the 25 seconds will be in the hands of our race day control centre."

It is believed that punters will be notified when the '25 second rule' is triggered via a clock which is visible through the race day monitors. In the case of one horse scoring up and the rest of the field still marshalling, the 25 seconds will not be triggered until the field has moved up together as one.

"The implementation of the countdown clock is still in the pipeline and I am unsure as to whether SKY will have it up and running in time for Monday's start," Fletcher said.

"If there is a false start declared in a race and the 25 seconds has expired, betting will be reopened, with the process repeating itself until the successful start of a race."

The issue of betting ceasing early has given cause for concern that the harness racing industry will lose a tremendous amount of turnover.

Fletcher revealed that the point of potential loss in revenue was raised at the meeting last week and added that integrity in the industry would offset any losses.

"It was discussed at the meeting and found that integrity within the industry was potentially more damaging than the loss which could be experienced through closing betting early," he said.

"The countdown model is a good model for allowing people to get their bets on, and canceling if need be, without damaging the integrity of the industry.

"The new model will be carried out on all TAB covered harness racing events in NSW, Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT - as of yet, it is unclear as to where the Uni-TAB conglomerate (Queensland, South Australia and Northern Territory) stand on the matter."

Queensland HRB Spokesman Damien Raedler said to his knowledge Uni-TAB would not be introducing such a dramatic procedure at this time.

"I am sure that Uni-TAB will have thorough consultation with the industry before venturing into the premature closing of betting on mobile start races," Raedler said.

NSW Harness Racing Club Chief Executive John Dumesny stated that he was at a loss to understand the urgent focus on the matter which had been in open discussion at the recent AHRC meetings in Auckland.

"This is not a new issue," he said. "The general consensus was that the cancellation of bets during the score-up required addressing, however, not to the detriment of turnover and not without further full industry consultation."

"The headlines and figures which were revealed in the Telegraph last week were what many described as an orchestrated beat-up."

"One instance demonstrated only a 0.9 per cent reduction in the overall TAB pool. A total of \$8057 was reportedly cancelled in November out of an overall turnover in excess of many millions."

"Also what the article did not show was the purpose for the cancellations. These may have been honest punter errors such as the wrong bet amount or even TAB staff errors-nothing sinister about that."

"There was just not enough information to make an objective view on the matter."

"This information should have been taken to the industry, not just a select few."

"This approach will certainly be detrimental to turnover and may even become farcical as the starter may be in two minds as to whether or not to declare a false start having the weight of a fair start to all runners on his determination alone, or, even feel he should quicken the start to beat the clock."

"Surely, with proper consultation with club officials, a method could have been arrived at that doesn't require a person off course relying on vision from SKY Channel to operate a stop clock."

"The number of times that vision is not available is becoming more and more prevalent and one can easily see a major error being made which will affect punters who should have been able to place their bets, let alone the thousands of dollars that will be lost to the industry with the incorrect premature cessation of betting."

"I am sure that the bookmakers will be taking bets up to when the arms fold in on the starting gate."

"Everyone in the industry is concerned about integrity issues but it seems that those charged with its responsibility may be just looking at the easiest solution to this matter - not the best solution for all. They don't even know how they are going to handle the mechanics of the stopclock."

Harness Racing Victoria Chief, John Anderson, said he was astounded by the decision to go with the new model so quickly.

"HRV is stunned with the knee jerk reaction by Tabcorp to this minor issue," he said

"It appears to me that only John Coughlan, Peter Baldwin and one journalist believe it to be a problem."

"The rest of the industry has been waiting for material evidence to determine whether we have a problem. None has been forthcoming, however, the industry had resolved to review the issue in more detail when more evidence had been accumulated."

"Not five days after the industry resolved as much, we are hit with this sledgehammer."

"Fifty hours per year of wagering, at the most critical time, has been lost to the Victorian industry."

"Harness racing is being targeted by our partners at the thoroughbreds, with the introduction of TVN, and now we have to deal with a significant cut in our revenue stream by our own joint venture partner."

Greyhound and Harness Racing Regulatory Authority Chief Executive, John Coughlan, support-

ed the model saying anything that is designed to improve and protect the integrity of the industry was worth trying.

"The issue of bets being canceled after a race has been an area of concern for a number of years," he said.

"As a consequence this new model was designed to hopefully address the issue and ensure the integrity of harness racing would not be tarnished."

"While there are a few finer points that still need to be cleared up before its implementation on Monday, anything that has the integrity of harness racing as its concern, is worth pursuing."

The finer points Coughlan was referring to involve the start of the 25 second clock, along with the actual amount of time allowed to cancel bets. It may come to surface that the 25 seconds could increase or decrease before Monday.

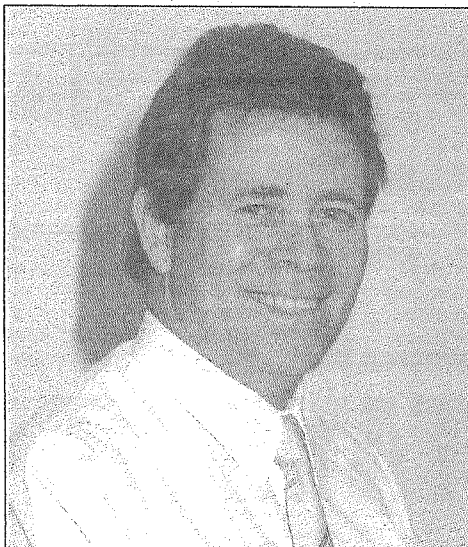
While the GHRRA supported the new model, Harness Racing NSW Chief Executive Max Pool said his organization were totally against it.

HRNSW proposed that a suitable method of closing the loophole would be to simply prohibit cancellation of bets at the commencement of the score up.

This proposal was put forward at the recent AHRC meeting by HRNSW and received general support as a sound methodical solution.

"We are not in favour of flashing lights, bells, whistles and hooters that result in closing the tote before the start," Pool said.

"Our proposed solution is simple and pragmatic - we don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater to address this issue which is being exploited by a minority."

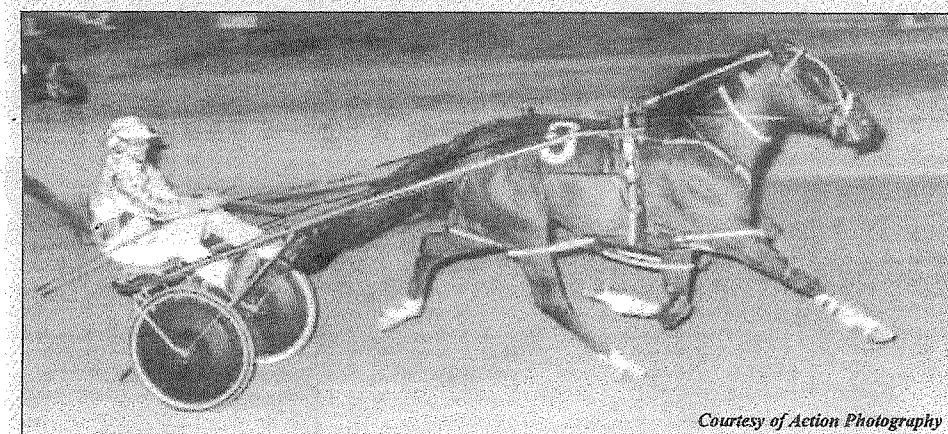


JOHN DUMESNY



JOHN ANDERSON

CARNIVAL A SUCCESS



Courtesy of Action Photography

Kyalla Dreamtime wins last Saturday night's \$100,000 Bathurst Gold Crown for driver Ben Sarina

RESULTS

2YO GOLD CROWN

1. KYALLA DREAMTIME
2. JAYLETT'S THUNDER
3. PRICELESS SAVIOUR

2YO GOLD TIARA

1. BOA VISTA LOMBO
2. LOMBO POW WOW
3. ENDEARED

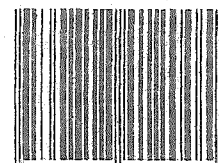
3YO GOLD CHALICE

1. GRINFORSEYMOUR
2. MAKE ME SMILE
3. GEORGE SLOY

3YO GOLD BRACELET

1. WHITE THUNDER
2. LOMBO PORTRAIT
3. VILLAGE BEAUTY

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