

Shadow falls on Harold Park

Twenty-first century realities to spell demise of famous city track



Brent ZERAFA
Special Report

THE death of Harold Park seems certain and more than 100 years of harness racing tradition in Sydney is about to come to an end, *The Daily Telegraph* can reveal.

Rumours about the closure of the inner-city track, which has been in operation since 1902, have reached fever pitch this week.

And the state's heavy-hitters are now putting moves in place that could see Harold Park sold for a whopping \$150 million and, by doing so, pave the way for a switch to the new 1400m state-of-the-art track which is being built at Menangle, south-west of Sydney.

Sources have revealed that Menangle could be the full-time home of harness racing within the next two years.

The fact that construction work has commenced at Menangle has made the issue a top priority.

The radical move is seen by many as a chance for NSW to fend off Victoria and Western Australia, whose industries continue to flourish and lure our top horses to their meetings.

The Group One NSW Derby will be shifted from Harold Park to Menangle in a grand opening on April 27 next year — a real sign the curtains could be dropped on Harold Park.

Trainers, drivers, administrators and punters have all thrown their support behind the Menangle move which, they say, can only allow the struggling sport — which is only now recovering financially from the Sky Channel-TVN war — to return to its former glory.

The NSW Harness Racing Club and Harness Racing NSW have commissioned an independent report in order to determine whether operating at Menangle will be beneficial.

The business plan — expected to be completed at the end of the year — will be put to members of the NSW Harness Racing Club who have the ultimate say as to whether Harold Park is sold.

Leading trainer Paul Fitzpatrick is adamant that Harold Park must be overlooked if harness racing in NSW is to survive.

"It is imperative that we sell Harold Park if we are to go forward," Fitzpatrick said.



A century of history... Menangle seems certain to win out over Harold Park in the pace race

"The industry has outgrown Harold Park and we need the money from the sale to keep moving forward.

"Menangle is the future and the sooner we start racing there full-time, the better."

Popular trainer and former racecaller John Tapp is keen to see a change of harness racing headquarters.

Asked whether he would support the push to sell Harold Park, Tapp said: "Will I ever."

"Too many people are locked in to the mindset that we need a metropolitan track in the city. But why do we?"

"In days gone by the streets of Glebe would ring to the clatter of hooves. These days not a single horse is even trained at Harold Park."

Miracle Mile and InterDominion-winning trainer-driver Steve Turnbull, while a supporter of Harold Park, said he would endorse the sale so much-needed funds could be injected back into the sport.

But despite the widespread push for Menangle, Rex Horne, vice-president of the NSW Harness Racing Club, said there were several issues that still needed to be addressed.

Horne said the results of the business plan had to prove that the move would actually be beneficial to the industry.

Seventy-five per cent of Harold Park members also need to agree to the sale before a move to Menangle can be given the green light.

Horne rammied home the fact that if racing was switched to Menangle — with the money from the Harold Park sale made available for prizemoney — NSW would once again become the leading state for harness racing.

"There is still a lot of things that need to be taken into consideration before the move is made, including the support from the NSW Harness Racing Club members," Horne said.

"One of the big advantages would be cash flow. We owe HRNSW \$25 million,

and if we invested what is left [\$125 million] at nine or 10 per cent, prizemoney would double overnight.

"If your ordinary race is now worth \$10,000, it will go to \$20,000.

"The Derby would go from \$100,000 to \$200,000, the Miracle Mile would go from \$500,000 to \$1 million."

Graeme Campbell, chairman of HRNSW, said he would not second-guess the results of the independent review, but noted the general feedback among the industry was they were in favour of leaving Harold Park.

Harold Park chief executive John Dumesny believes the bigger Menangle track will attract bigger turnover and, as a result, return more money to the industry.

Certainly, there are many in the industry now looking to the south-west of Sydney, adamant there is an opportunity for an exciting new era in NSW harness racing.



MOVE TO MENANGLE



"Menangle is a beautiful setting and it provides the perfect vehicle for

the sport in this state to move forward.

"I'm a strong detractor of 800m tracks (which is in place at Harold Park). A larger track like Menangle is a must if the sport is to regenerate in NSW."

John TAPP
Trainer, commentator



"I'm not a fan of big tracks, but if it means we can fix the

industry then I would be all for it.

"I am all for moving forward, but I still prefer racing on half-mile tracks. I like Harold Park, you are so much closer to the action."

Steve TURNBULL
Trainer, driver



"Personally I can't see that there will be any negatives in selling Harold

Park and moving to Menangle.

"I get to a lot of race meetings in the city and in the country and speak to a lot of people and I would say 90 per cent of those believe (the move to Menangle) is an inevitable situation."

Graeme CAMPBELL
HRNSW Chairman



"It is going to satisfy all participants being owners, breeders,

trainers and drivers who want to see racing on a bigger circuit.

"This will increase the confidence of punters and therefore increase turnover, which is vital for racing across the three codes."

John DUMESNY
NSWHRC CEO

What they said



Trackwork at Menangle

Time running out... harness racing's days at Harold Park could be numbered with a possible relocation to Menangle.
Picture: BRETT COSTELLO