



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - MR GEOFF WANT
AHRC ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 26 OCTOBER 2007

It is often said that a year can be an especially long time in racing and this has certainly been the case with the Australian harness racing industry in the past twelve months.

The industry will always have issues to deal with and for a time it looked like this year's could be the commencement of testing for HPC. One participant protested in an email that administrative decisions such as the one on HPC testing would bring harness racing to its knees. The HPC issue was confronted and resolved as part of the mission for harness racing to be a level playing field in all jurisdictions.

Without wishing to trivialise the HPC debate or any other issues that have confronted harness racing in recent times, it took something far more sinister to bring our great industry to its knees.

There is no need for me to document how the equine influenza disaster unfolded, as every person in harness racing has lived the nightmare. But there are a few points I would like to make.

Early in the crisis, Council publicly expressed its gratitude to all controlling bodies and clubs for the professional manner in which they handled this grave problem. It is appropriate this endeavour again be recognised, especially in the hardest hit areas of Queensland and New South Wales.

We should all be very grateful that the other states suffered only minor loss of races and were able to soldier on in difficult and costly circumstances.

The AHRC is appreciative of government assistance provided to date but will continue to campaign for a better deal. There is ample evidence many of our political leaders do not fully appreciate the economic and social impact of harness racing. And for that, we, as an industry, must shoulder some of the blame.

We are currently finalising letters to federal political leaders seeking assurances the plight of the many thousands of equine influenza victims will not be lost in the federal election campaign.

The AHRC has joined with the Australian Racing Board and other equine bodies to appear before the Callinan Inquiry and the findings, due in March, are keenly awaited. Apart from HOW it happened, we need to be looking hard at everything that has unfolded and the success of the measures taken to plan for the future. It would be naïve to believe our industry will not encounter threats such as this ever again.

Our immediate focus must be on three key areas:-

1. How we rebuild the harness racing brand. There is evidence of disillusioned participants walking away from our industry, which makes it less likely many less passionate supporters will “stay solid”. We should try to get the most positive approach and see this as an opportunity for a national re-launch of harness racing.
2. The Executive has discussed the appointment of a working party to compile, in conjunction with all state bodies, a full report on the cost of the EI crisis. Furthermore, to consider possible areas for compensation claims, should such action be deemed appropriate at some future time.
3. How we share our experiences of this disaster and understand the extent of it. I believe a national summit should be held over two days early in the New Year, involving a variety of industry interest groups. It could improve our knowledge from various perspectives. Inter-Dominion grand final week in Melbourne would seem an appropriate time and venue, with many people in town for the carnival.

I urge Council to consider these matters – as well as any others deemed appropriate – at the annual meeting and make some decisions on how we tackle the Road to Recovery.

The Inter Dominion occupied a great deal of time this year with the wide ranging discussions on the future format of the event, the proposed marketing fund and the dissolution of the IDHRC. Hopefully all of the debate is behind us after today's meetings and we can focus on what is really important, restoring the Inter Dominion to a position of eminence on the Australian and New Zealand sporting calendars.

My sincere thanks to everyone involved in the Inter Dom projects over the past year and to the sponsors who have stepped forward to back the new concept, especially Kevin Seymour committing Watpac as Naming Rights Sponsor.

Heartiest congratulations to Harness Racing Victoria for having the courage to press ahead with ID08. I'm aware not everyone shares this view but frankly, harness racing needs to be attracting attention post-EI and the Inter Dominion has too many positives to be ignored, even if prizemoney is reduced.

There have been other significant undertakings this year which should not be overlooked because of EI.

At the Perth mid-season meeting, Council appointed a working party to consider what would be involved in becoming a Company Limited by Guarantee. The working party, ably chaired by Ross Cooper, examined a range of issues and prepared a draft constitution for consideration by Council members. The Executive felt there needed to be a greater understanding of what would be achieved by incorporation, and the impact such action could have on existing Members in terms of their legislative requirements in the various states. The report has been distributed to Members for comment.

A recommendation will be put forward at today's meeting to change the name of the AHRC to Harness Racing Australia. I also favour expansion of the Executive to include a representative of each state. Perhaps these matters can be reviewed and, if they are as simple to implement as I'm led to believe, adopted at the next Mid-Season meeting. They need to be thoroughly researched but both measures would assist in improving our image, relevance and governance.

Council will finalise the contract for the integration of each State's HaRVEY databases with RISE, our industry's service provider in the near future.

A draft of the Council's first ever Strategic Plan has also been produced ... this will be circulated for comment after some further work is done on it.

The appointment of Richard Smith as National Business Manager has been well received and the Industry Development Group was doing some good work, prior to being distracted by EI.

I must welcome HRNZ chairman John Penney and his colleagues to the conference. The Australian and New Zealand Executives have commenced regular meetings to compare industry issues and I thank John for his input to this process and his valuable contribution to the debate on the future of the Inter Dominion.

Best wishes also to HRNZ in conducting the World Trotting Conference in Christchurch in just over a week's time.

Good luck to Kerryn Manning, who represents Australia in the World Drivers' Championship starting in Victoria next week, then moving to New Zealand.

Many thanks to all Council Members for the contribution you make to the well being of the national body through our various committees and working parties, and to Rod Pollock and the AHRC staff for their dedicated efforts.

Most of all, I'm indebted to Bob Lette, Neil Busse and Ray Sharman who have provided encouragement and wise counsel to back up their hard work as an Executive. Thank you for the opportunity to chair Council this year – and for having the confidence to return the Executive unopposed.

The year in review has been a lot tougher than we all envisaged in Brisbane last October. Despite the devastation caused by equine influenza, there have been many positives through the year – and we must focus on these as we head along the Road to Recovery.

Certainly, harness racing faces some big challenges, but I can see no reason why we should not be positive and look to the future with confidence. I have no doubt meeting these challenges will be easier if we form a united front and do it together.

Thank you.

Geoff Want
Chairman