



## **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - MR GEOFF WANT**

### **HRA MID-SEASON MEETING 26 MARCH 2009**

It is only four months since the annual meeting in Sydney but it has been a busy time, with some outstanding racing over the summer months and plenty happening off the track.

At the AGM I expressed my belief that harness racing in Australia is facing its biggest threat in decades, primarily due to the downturn in wagering turnover, a further fall in the standardbred foal crop and the global financial crisis.

Nothing has happened since then to alter my views, although I would add complacency – by governments and administrators – to the list of concerns.

The leakage of wagering turnover to the corporate bookmakers and betting exchanges has become a flood, with the race fields legislation our industry's only hope of clawing back some of the money we have lost. This legislation and the leakage of wagering turnover is a discussion item on the agenda for today's meeting and I urge you all to contribute to the debate.

HRA's concerns on the leakage of wagering turnover were conveyed to the state governments at the Australasian Racing Ministers' conference in Melbourne in December. The Australian Racing Board and Greyhounds Australasia expressed similar concerns.

In a communiqué issued after the meeting it was reported the Ministers had agreed to work with their respective Heads of Treasury to examine "the financial arrangements underpinning Australian racing and wagering".

We can only wait and see if anything constructive, from a harness racing industry perspective, comes from these deliberations.

The effects of the drought are still being felt in many parts of the country, while some of our participants were affected by the devastating bushfires in Victoria. I'm sure many people watching the outstanding Hunter Cup meeting at Moonee Valley on Saturday the 7<sup>th</sup> of February were not aware of the deadly drama unfolding not far away.

Congratulations to all in harness racing, in Australia and New Zealand, who rallied to provide support to the victims of the bushfires. We wish them, and the people affected by the terrible North Queensland floods, the best of good fortune as they rebuild their lives.

Whilst on misfortune, I must record HRA's condolences to the colleagues, friends and family of the late Peter Baldwin following his untimely death in a road accident earlier this month. Our paths crossed many times over the years and I had the utmost respect for Peter's passionate yet professional approach to his work.

This was reinforced during the equine influenza outbreak when Peter represented HRA at numerous meetings, dedicating many hours to the cause on top of his duties with the GHRRA.

There are some post-EI issues on the agenda today for discussion, most importantly how we should proceed regarding any horse disease response levy. This appears to have become a political football in Canberra and we need to ensure the harness racing industry is not the one being kicked around.

There is also an update today on the appointment of our Canberra lobbyists – even more critical in the current climate than when we first discussed it at the mid-season meeting in Melbourne last year – and a presentation on the national research project.

Broadcast issues have been listed for discussion, given the concerns of several members at changes being proposed by Sky Channel. These concerns may well prove to be unfounded, but until Sky's plans are known it is difficult to feel comfortable. We also do not want to be presented with a fait accompli by Sky.

This is a vital issue, as the stakes are high. Our Members cannot afford to take another hit to turnover such as in the Sky broadcast rights stoush with TVN, yet this is the likely scenario if harness racing's exposure on the main Sky service is diminished.

A special welcome again to our friends from Harness Racing New Zealand, chairman Pat O'Brien and chief executive Edward Rennell. I look forward to Edward's presentation later today on how the industry is travelling across the Tasman.

On the HRA administrative front, we need to approve at today's meeting the changes to our Rules of Association and standing orders to provide for an expanded Executive, as requested at the annual meeting. This has effectively been the case since the annual meeting with all states involved in Executive business, but needs to be formalised today. I have no doubt it will result in a more effective national body with improved communication with Members.

Also before today's meeting is the draft of HRA's strategic objectives, prepared by Andrew Kelly following written submissions from, and meetings with, all Members. This is the first step in developing HRA's strategic plan, which will be finalised over the coming months.

My thanks go to Andrew for his untiring efforts since becoming chief executive and I also thank his dedicated staff. Thanks also to the members of the Executive for their input and support and to all who give of their time to serve on the various HRA committees.

Congratulations to Harness Racing Victoria on the official opening of the \$45-million Tabcorp Park facility at Melton earlier this month. Neil Busse and the HRV Board, and John Anderson and his team, have done a tremendous job in developing a facility which will provide enormous benefit to our industry for many years to come.

We wish HRV every success with the Melton venture and eagerly await the commencement of racing at the track in July.

Congratulations also to HRV for staging the Inter Dominion Trotting Championship this year, won so brilliantly by Sundon's Gift at Moonee Valley on 7<sup>th</sup> February. We'll all be cheering Sundon's Gift and Chris Lang when they take on the world's best trotters at the Elitloppet in Sweden in late May.

In the meantime, we have a far more important engagement at Parklands on Saturday night. We lost the grandstand at Albion Park and major challengers such as Safari, Divisive and Melpark Major in the lead-up to the Watpac Inter Dominion Pacing Championships 2009.

But what a series it has been so far. A super venue and brilliant racing, auguring well for a fantastic final to Watpac ID09 on Saturday night.

Congratulations to Warwick Stansfield, David Fowler and all at the Albion Park Harness Racing Club, and Bob Lette, Mike Godber and the crew at Harness Racing Queensland, along with Andrew Kelly and Richard Smith from HRA for your efforts to date.

We wish you perfect weather, a record crowd, massive turnover and great racing on Saturday night.

Thank you – and best wishes for a productive mid-season meeting.

Geoff Want  
Chairman