



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - MR GEOFF WANT

HRA MID-SEASON MEETING 20 APRIL 2015

It is now six months since the annual general meeting of Harness Racing Australia and the Mid-Season meeting is being held later than usual, which I believe is a welcome break from the practice of recent years.

This meeting has usually been held in Inter Dominion week, in late February-early March, and only a few months after the AGM. After factoring in the summer holiday period there was not a lot of time between the two key meetings.

The Mid-Season meeting was moved this year because HRA was hosting the 24th World Trotting Conference in Inter Dominion week and, with the Inter Dom moving to an early summer slot, it is hoped we continue to hold our two main meetings roughly six months apart.

Much has been happening both on and off the track since the AGM, with plenty of focus on integrity issues, animal welfare and political matters, as well as a great deal of fabulous racing throughout Australia.

Racing

Christen Me scored an exciting win in the Miracle Mile at Tabcorp Park Menangle and provided one of the highlights of the HRV summer carnival in winning the Victoria Cup at Tabcorp Park Melton, while Arden Rooney was a surprise winner of the Hunter Cup and Stent was dominant in the Great Southern Star. But the highlight of the year for many was at the New South Wales Harness Racing Club's Super Sunday meeting at Menangle on the 1st of March.

On a day of magnificent performances, there were two standout runs which were deserving of a far greater audience and which will be talked about for years to come. Adore Me was simply breathtaking in blitzing a quality field in the Ladyship Mile, sitting parked but streeting her rivals in the remarkable time of 1:47.7.

Spectators were still buzzing when the field faced the starter for the Inter Dominion final, only to see James Rattray and Beautide treat the opposition with disdain for his second straight victory in the great race.

The international visitors for the World Trotting Conference and the associated World Driving Championships were trackside and left Menangle impressed both by the facility and the quality of the racing. It was a wonderful advertisement for Australian harness racing.

World Trotting Conference

The world conference was an outstanding success, with a comprehensive and informative agenda covering the major issues affecting all members of the International Trotting Association.

Despite the obvious differences brought about by different cultures or the size of the industry in the various ITA jurisdictions, we all have similar problems. The issues we all seem to face broadly include:-

- * Improving our revenue in a changing world where there is so much competition for the leisure dollar.
- * Growing the fan base in an environment where there are so many other distractions - and people seem to be "time poor".
- * Meeting the challenges to our traditional wagering arrangements, especially the growth of both legal and illegal corporate bookmakers in most jurisdictions.
- * Ensuring we have a best practice integrity regime.
- * Making the best possible use of the opportunities presented by the digital age.

- * Encouraging standardbred breeding and at least maintaining the foal crop at existing levels.
- * Ensuring animal welfare protocols are followed by all people involved with the industry.
- * And finding more owners to invest in our tremendous industry.

There were some outstanding presentations - indeed, every one was interesting - during the plenary sessions and some robust debate at the committee meetings over the five days of the conference. Andrew Kelly will be giving a report later in the Mid-Season meeting but there are two matters I wish to touch on briefly.

ATG in Sweden has made significant improvement in broadcast technology to enhance the presentation of the harness racing product, including positions in running software and considerable visual enhancements and statistical data. Sky had a project team undertaking similar work some 15 years ago but it seems to have gone nowhere, although I note the Australian Turf Club has introduced something similar for on-course coverage at Randwick in the last fortnight.

This technology is probably better suited to enhancing harness racing coverage than the other two codes of racing and we need to pursue this issue with Sky or another supplier.

The second matter pertains to animal welfare. The world conference followed only days after the ABC Four Corners expose on live baiting in the greyhound industry which sickened most viewers.

RSPCA chief executive Heather Neill, who has worked closely with HRA on our changes to whip rules and other animal welfare matters, gave a timely presentation reminding all delegates of their animal welfare responsibilities. She said we should all use a litmus test when considering the effectiveness of our animal welfare policies and procedures - is it ethically acceptable?

She also indicated it is time HRA and our members reviewed our whip rules and considered whether we needed to use whips at all.

A few weeks later the ABC Catalyst program reported on a study into the pain inflicted by whips on thoroughbreds which claimed, in part, that the horses could be more sensitive to pain than humans. There has been more disturbing animal welfare news in recent weeks with mass greyhound graves being unearthed in Queensland and NSW.

These events are a wake-up call for everyone involved with animals, in that we must be constantly vigilant. There is no place for complacency.

As outlined in the agenda papers for today's meeting, HRA member chief executives have begun a review of our industry's equine welfare culture and practices.

Before moving on from the world conference it is appropriate I record my appreciation of the work done by Andrew Kelly and his team from HRA in preparing for and running the event. A former colleague of mine was fond of saying "*time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted*" and this certainly proved true, with the many hours of preparation resulting in a conference and social program applauded by all our visitors.

Thanks also to Harness Racing NSW and the NSW Harness Racing Club for their contributions to the success of the conference and the World Driving Championship, and to Harness Racing New Zealand for assisting with staff resources.

World Driving Championship

Dexter Dunn was a deserved winner of the World Driving Championship for New Zealand, his silken skills dominating the series and amassing a record points score for the competition. Chris Alford was a worthy Australian representative and won much praise from his fellow drivers for the ambassadorial role he undertook, while Peter McMullen was appreciative of the opportunity his travelling reserve role presented for him to mix with and learn from some of the world's best drivers.

Heartiest congratulations to all the host clubs who treated the drivers like royalty and who made the most of the promotional opportunities the series presented.

Integrity

Integrity is a constant battle field for all administrators and HRA's Members are committed to identifying and penalising anyone breaching the Australian Rules of Harness Racing. There has been considerable publicity about cobalt in recent months but this is only one of the prohibited substances for which our integrity officers are constantly on the lookout.

It was extremely disappointing in February to have two prominent figures in the Victorian industry charged with alleged race fixing after a lengthy investigation. Whilst they are still to appear before the courts and the charges have to be proven, it is disappointing that the reputation of our entire industry is tarnished by the adverse publicity the case attracted.

Funding

Industry funding remains a grave concern for all administrators and the trends towards fixed price betting and corporate bookmakers show no signs of abating. Members are reviewing the findings of the HRA Wagering Panel report late last year to determine which recommendations can be adopted.

Hopefully, the long awaited Hot Shots will provide a boost to wagering turnover when it is introduced this year. The launch has again been delayed, because of the track upgrade at Gloucester Park, but I'm assured we will at least get to test the effectiveness of the new racing format in July.

Media

Most members will be aware that I have spoken on numerous occasions about the dangers of parochialism, with one example being local rules and a lack of consistency in penalties imposed in different jurisdictions.

Many of our competitors for the leisure dollar are highly organised and well resourced national sporting bodies, but we seem incapable of recognising our shortcomings or combining our resources, to take a collaborative approach to promoting harness racing throughout Australia.

At this meeting last year we appointed a committee to develop an industry wide media plan, which could include development of a national media centre to increase the exposure of harness racing, especially with digital media projects.

I said at the time that despite the impact of new media and the digital age, and the potential effect of emerging technologies on our industry, we seemed incapable of working together to meet the challenge.

The CEOs discussed the Media Consolidation Committee at their February meeting and it is my understanding that each state is committed to individual digital strategies for web sites and social media. The states use their own individual websites to push local promotions, news and information to participants and fans.

The CEOs decided to incorporate Media Consolidation in their twice yearly meetings, which I hope will be an appropriate forum for determining how we progress this significant matter.

Whilst I would prefer to see a collaborative approach on a host of media issues I can understand the desire of each state to pursue their own agenda, but I would urge the CEOs to give careful consideration to developing a national digital media strategy. State based projects could - and should - be part of this strategy, but we must have clearly defined objectives for digital media in the next few years.

There was a fascinating session on digital media at the world conference with insightful presentations by American guru Rob Keys, who's company Converseon is working on projects with the USTA, and the Melbourne based head of Sportsgeek, Sean Callanan. A recurring theme was the need for an integrated social media strategy for the industry.

Sky

There will be discussion at today's meeting on the protracted negotiations with Sky for a better deal for members, particularly in regards to matters such as new media. It is some months since our last correspondence although Sky has indicated that they will be providing a response in due course.

It is interesting that the new media rights which HRA requested for our Members - and which were rejected by Sky in mid-2014 - have now been granted to NSW thoroughbred clubs under the new state wide agreement struck earlier this year. It is understood a similar deal has been offered to Racing Victoria in the wake of the demise of TVN.

It would seem reasonable to assume that Sky has overcome the concerns about allowing clubs to utilise their live racing vision in new media applications and that there should now be no objection to offering similar concessions to HRA members. We will continue to attempt to get resolution of these matters with Sky.

Acknowledgements

Congratulations to the NSW Harness Racing Club and Harness Racing NSW for another hugely successful Inter Dominion carnival, the last in the three year promotion they undertook.

We now look forward to the next three Inter Dominion carnivals in Western Australia. I applaud the Gloucester Park club and RWWA for running the final on a Sunday afternoon, which will certainly increase the exposure of the event in the eastern states and New Zealand.

I've already congratulated the HRA team for their work on the world conference and driving championship, but this extends to everything they do. They are a dedicated and productive team and deserving of our appreciation, as is our legal counsel, Dean Cooper.

Many thanks also to everyone who serves on the various HRA committees and working parties, which make such a valuable contribution to our industry, especially the members of the HRA Executive Committee.

There is no New Zealand report on the agenda for today's meeting as it was believed HRNZ would not be able to attend, but thankfully Edward Rennell has managed to find time to join us and will be providing an insight into what is happening across the ditch. HRA and HRNZ continue to have an excellent working relationship, which brings benefits for both parties.

It is a busy agenda today and I trust it will be a worthwhile Mid-Season meeting. Thanks,

Geoff Want
Chairman