

SENATE ADDRESS

by Barry Irwin

Horse racing is in crisis. The public perceives racing to be out of control. Our image can be resuscitated. But before we can offer a race day program worthy of public trust, steps need to be taken to improve the integrity of the game. The Federal government can help.

Horse racing is a sport. It began when an owner thought his horse was faster than another fellow's. To settle it, a race was held. It came to pass that if these contests were sufficiently appealing, interest could be generated from the public, which would attend and bet on the outcome. If enough contests were arranged, a racing association could be formed to regularly offer races. Benefits to the public included new jobs and taxes that could be levied by governments. In order for governments to justify taxing bets on races, states set up commissions to safeguard the integrity of the sport. This is the basis of racing as we know it today.

But the grand bargain has been broken. State governments have let down their constituents.

For racing to thrive it must give the public enough confidence to place a bet. State commissions must guarantee a sport that is conducted on a level playing field. Because commissions fail at this, the fabric of the sport has unraveled and the public has lost faith in the product.

Before the public can be won back, our industry must be able to improve its product. The steps that need to be taken, however, seem beyond the grasp of the racing commissions. This is why we need Federal assistance.

Racing has two drug problems; one of its own making, another foisted upon it. Some 40 years ago state commissions were sold a rotten bill of good by the name of "permissive medication," a failed experiment that has served to devalue our horses and bloodlines and to isolate us among all major racing centers of the world.

Just as insidious is a group of cheaters that have hurt the sport's image and tied racing commissions in knots.

State racing commissions, with few exceptions, do a lousy job of identifying cheaters, investigating them and adjudicating them. Reasons include lack of will, lack of sufficient funding, lack of qualified personnel and failure to prevail in court against cheaters. So cheaters cheat, sometimes they get caught, but too many that do wriggle off the hook by hiring private sector defenders that beat their civil service counterparts. We need new and tougher Federal law to rid our sport of miscreants.

Adding to the confusion is that since race day drugs were legalized in 1970, the public cannot distinguish between positives for therapeutic medications and ones considered illegal. As a result the public cannot tell the good guys from the bad guys.

Making matters worse is an absence of cooperation or uniformity between states. Instead we have is a crazy quilt of drug rules that differ from state to state. This causes confusion for innocent trainers and regularly leads to positive tests that could have been avoided if uniformity of rules existed on a national level.

States are more interested in maximizing tax revenue than in providing a level playing field. Much of what ails horse racing and prevents the industry from being able to right itself can be blamed directly on a lack of uniform rules. But some states like it this way.

States are in competition with other states. Racetracks are in direct competition with racetracks in other states for top horses. So trainers play states against one another, lobbying for more lax drug rules. States that appease trainers get the horses, the other states don't.

It is unfair for states that take a tough approach to drug rules to suffer because rival or neighboring states ease their rules in order to get trainers to send horses their way. I live in Kentucky, the Thoroughbred racing and breeding capital of America, and our state recently passed a rule that will eliminate race day drugs. Kentucky figures to lose business because it took a progressive stance. It is unfair for Kentucky to lose business and revenue for doing the right thing. And it is outrageous for states and racetracks that will allow drug use to prosper.

Each state has serious conflicts of interest that combine to weaken racing as a whole. If there was a national policy providing uniform drug rules for every racing jurisdiction, all states would be on a level playing field, which is as it should be.

Putting horses at risk and mistreating them by juicing them with drugs is no way for states to line their coffers, for racetracks to improve their bottom line or for trainers to make a better living. We need to stop drugging thoroughbred racehorses in order to make them the beast of burden that will carry our industry on its back. We should be celebrating this glorious athlete, not trashing it.