

A Time to Reflect

The roller coaster ride that the local Thoroughbred industry has been experiencing in 2003, continued with the sub par results of California Cup XIV on Nov. 8. As is typical on Cal Cup Day, there were full fields with great competitive racing. In fact, the Juvenile Fillies Stakes, which featured the victorious House of Fortune and Silent Sighs battling down the stretch, was arguably one of the best races of the meet. It was also a great day for Harris Farms, who raised 50 percent of the winners including Classic champ Tizbud. And the infield party, attended by most of our leading breeders, was as good as ever.

But overall we were, along with Oak Tree Racing Association, somewhat disappointed in the results of the day. The handle and attendance numbers were far below our expectations. According to CHRIMS, the total handle was down over 7.5 percent with the on- and off-track figures declining similarly. There was, however, significant growth in Advance Deposit Wagering. In reviewing the handle at the various out-of-state outlets, I did notice that the Nevada handle of \$780,000 was up over 20 percent from last year, further emphasizing the attractiveness of full fields to the betting public.

The 35 percent drop in on-track attendance was also very alarming. We were aware that in the past we had experienced a decline in attendance at Cal Cup when the Breeders' Cup was also held at Oak Tree, as experienced in 1993. However, it was our belief that our increased advertising efforts would somewhat combat the concerns of lower attendance. The combination of Breeders' Cup being held at the same venue two weeks prior, along with the bus strike in California, proved difficult to overcome.

CTBA and Oak Tree officials will meet soon to discuss the date and overall marketing plans for the 15th renewal next year. Our preliminary discussions have centered on hosting Cal Cup on Oct. 16, 2004, which would be two weeks prior to the Breeders' Cup XXI World Thoroughbred Championships at Lone Star Park in Texas. In any event, we will look at all of our options in order to restore Cal Cup as one of the top racing days of the year.

As mentioned at the beginning of this editorial, 2003 has indeed been an up and down year. It started off with a bang, as we were able to offer, in conjunction with MEC (Magna Entertainment Corp.), TOC (Thoroughbred Owners of California) and both the FTBOA (Florida Thoroughbred Breeders' and Owners' Association) and FHBPA (Florida Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association), the inaugural running of the \$3.6 million Sunshine

Millions. Nowhere in the world has there ever been a more lucrative racing event restricted to top performers from just two states. Although California-breds were well represented, racing luck was not with us, as we won only one of the eight stakes races run. We have signed a three-year contract extension to continue this event and are optimistic that we will see more favorable results in the future. Our other premier racing day, California Gold Rush IV at Hollywood Park in April, was once again a popular event with over 100 horses entered in the 10 stakes races and the handle and attendance numbers consistent with prior years.

The breeding and foaling season for the most part went well, as the mares bred and live foal reports were on par with the upward trends realized over the last few years. Also, Golden State-based stallions continue to be listed among the leading sires in many of the various categories, and breeders are continuing to upgrade and bring better mares and stallions to the state. In fact, I was very encouraged by the number of Californians who were active with purchases at the recent Keeneland November Breeding Stock Sale.

The CTBA Sales Del Mar Yearling Sale in August, as documented in the September issue of *California Thoroughbred*, was also a disappointment. Although the auction yielded the fourth highest average in the history of the sale (\$34,506), the overall numbers were down considerably from the records set in 2002. The variables that attributed to the decline (Workers' Compensation costs, quality of the individuals both physically and on pedigree, and concerns with radiographs and sales preparation) are all issues that we are currently addressing.

This year's Barretts October Preferred Yearling Sale did show across the board gains as the average increased 7.6 percent to \$13,619. This sale has proven to be a good option for Cal-bred yearlings who are not sold at Del Mar.

The Seventh Annual Harris Ranch Seminar held this fall was one of our best yet. This event received numerous compliments by the many attendees. The presentations and subject matter were very well done and the dinner speech by Chris McCarron received rave reviews. The Education Committee will soon begin planning for next year's event.

In conclusion, although we experienced temporary setbacks this year, there is reason to still be optimistic about the future. Let's hope 2004 brings success in all our endeavors.

Happy Holidays.

—Doug Burge

