

## BITS -n- PIECES

# MOST HORSEMEN WON'T LIVE TO SEE THE MONEY THE FHBPA HAS SQUANDERED

by Gene Stevens

From the moment I left show business and became involved in the racing industry more than four decades ago I have fought for the maximizing of purses and benefits for horsemen, the people who put on the show.

So, imagine my surprise when I attended a "Welcome Back To Calder" meeting in April prior to the opening of its race meet, to learn that the Florida Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association (of which I am a member), was threatening to stop the track's simulcast signal from being transmitted. Under the Interstate Horsemen's Act, the FHBPA is legally permitted to do this. But the question is, since simulcasting results in so much more revenue, why was the FHBPA seeking something so counter-productive. Obviously, the Florida horsemen feel underpaid and unappreciated and want more benefits.

I stood up at the meeting and said I couldn't agree with them more, but felt they were attempting to get what they want and deserve in the wrong way. It was the first time I was ever subjected to hissing from any horsemen's group. I felt like Walt Disney being booed by Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse.

I pointed out that I was the only person in the media who constantly stood up for the horsemen, saying that for the most part they were treated like slaves being manipulated by their masters. I tried to explain that some of their demands were unreasonable and could be construed as their taking on the role of master, which wasn't going to work because any negotiation and compromise had to be good for all parties.

I reminded them that the major cause of the demise of Hialeah Park, once a shining example of the best racing had to offer, was an inability to compromise and unless we learn from our mistakes we are

doomed to repeat them. I implored them to negotiate without cutting off the signal. Less wagering, I reminded them, can only result in their winding up with less than they were getting, which all agree was insufficient. Unfortunately, it all fell on deaf ears.

After the simulcast signal was pulled Churchill Downs was compelled to reduce Calder's purses by 30 percent. Calder's simulcast signal, with the exception of a limited period the day of the Preakness, was absent from April 21 through July 7, a few days after the FHBPA and CDI agreed on items which could easily have been settled prior to the opening of the meet while other negotiations began.

Initial figures indicate that the horsemen, who ordered the signal be held captive, lost almost \$3 million due to reduced purses. During this same period, Churchill Downs' losses were about \$4 million. Prior to the signal being returned on the July 4 weekend, handle was down about 90 percent from last year. And how do you make up for the multitudes of customers lost during the battle and the many trainers who left Calder for northern tracks where purses were two to three times higher, and who may never come back?

Here's the bottom line. The purse money for racing the rest of this year will be about the same as last. Negotiations for a purse contract for slot machines, which it was suggested be continued while the signal was operative, wasn't that far from what was offered prior to the meet. There was no sensible reason the slot negotiations couldn't have continued with the signal in place because everyone knew slots would not be operational until 2009 or 2010, IF EVER. Such offers by Churchill Downs were repeatedly turned down by the FHBPA.

It's unfortunate the \$7 million wasted primarily due to the FHBPA's executive board's arrogance, non-

disclosure and failure to candidly communicate with many of its horsemen, wasn't used for something constructive. One I can think of is a realistic attempt to induce Florida legislators to lower the abhorrent 50 percent slot machine taxation to a level which would enable parimutuels to more fairly compete with the extensive competition.

The actions taken by the horsemen amounted to stupidity to the tenth power because most of them are unlikely to live long enough to recoup the millions they are responsible for squandering. Many horsemen who agree with this have asked me what they can do to protect themselves against the executive board repeating its reprehensible actions. The answer: ELECT A NEW BOARD.

HBPA President Sam Gordon has been a big disappointment to me. Primarily due to my not knowing many of the executive board members, I expected a lot more from Sammy, who has never made a mistake. If you don't believe this, just ask him. I received a letter from Gordon right after the FHBPA and Gulfstream agreed to and signed a slot contract with Magna. He complimented me for the hard work I had done in bringing everyone together and said if it weren't for me the horsemen might not have gotten the slot deal they were after from Frank Stronach.

I have received similar letters over the years from major thoroughbred industry leaders complimenting me on my contributions. But the most meaningful correspondence of all are the ones from Lou Wolfson, the late gifted philanthropist and owner of Affirmed. Wolfson sought my help as early as 1973, immediately upon Post Time USA's emergence, and I'm among many who believe he did more in his efforts to benefit racing than any other individual.



July 14, 2006

Gene Stevens  
Post Time USA  
1800 North East 114th Street  
Miami, Florida  
USA 33181

Dear Gene:

I would be remiss if I did not write and thank you for all your insight and cooperation on the journey of slot approval at Gulfstream Park. Your passion, your caring, your work ethic for the entire thoroughbred industry is unmatched in my experience of working with Magna.

So on behalf of Frank and the entire MEC team, thank you.

Sincerely,

**MEC**

Dennis Mills

## Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association, Inc.®

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P.O. Box 1806  
Opa Locka, Florida 33055-0806



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September 6, 2006

Mr. Gene Stevens  
1800 NE 114 Street Suite 2103  
Miami, Florida 33181

Dear Gene:

I have been out of town but this is a belated thank you for all your help securing the contract between the FHBPA and Gulfstream Park. I know you worked many long hours bringing the parties together and you deserve the thanks from both sides. I sincerely believe we ended up with a beneficial contract for all.

Thanks again.

Sincerely,

Sam Gordon  
President

## Harbor View Farms

Post Office Box 4  
Jacksonville, Florida 32201

October 16, 1973

Mr. Eugene Jacobs  
125-10 Queens Boulevard, Apt. 1806  
Kew Gardens, N. Y. 11415

Dear Gene:

Enclosed are the first two issues of POST TIME, August and September, 1973, which I would appreciate your sharing with Austin.

I want to refer you to, the Open Letter to Governor Askew, which appeared in the August Issue, and Mr. Stevens' column in the September issue, "Regarding Prejudice Toward Racing." I feel that you and the National HBPA will find these two items extremely important. I would appreciate your contacting Mr. Gene Stevens and giving him a list of important people in our organization and in the industry, so that they may get future Post Time publications.

In his letter to Governor Askew, Stevens has pretty fully covered the problems confronting the thoroughbred industry in Florida which will get worse in the future, due to the possibility of New York racing being in operation 12 months and Florida, therefore, not having the quality of horses available. As a matter of fact, they may have shortages to fill racing. It is just too bad that the Governor does not have enough vision to recognize this problem.

With reference to the other article in the September issue, I believe it is about time that we in this industry tried to change the bad image people are trying to put on our industry. This article gives up an opportunity to take the offensive in exposing this type of hypocrisy.

In my opinion, our industry certainly should have contact with POST TIME and cooperate and help them in any way possible. So I am hopeful that you will contact him at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Louis E. Wolfson