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AT LAST...

Way, way back in 1986, I was invited to speak at The Jockey Club Round Table in August at Saratoga.

I thought it went fine. After all, I reasoned at the time, I was leaving Santa Anita and racing altogether, and could "tell it like it is." The reaction in the room to my remarks was startling and apparently supportive of what I had to say, some of it bluntly critical of racing's leadership and approach to marketing, which was my principal interest then.

The Jockey Club felt otherwise. For one thing, Mr. Phipps never spoke to me again (not that we were in the same social and professional circles!), and the racing media at the time interpreted what I had to say as radical.

The late Tim Capps reported in *The Thoroughbred Record* that I had "scolded racing for not being willing to face competition head-on, for not reacting aggressively to new competitive forces, whether they be lotteries or other forms of gambling or simply other leisure activities." He quoted me as saying, "As the old boys on the block, we ought to know how to do this, yet we seem to act like we know less about competing effectively."

In his opinion piece in the same issue, Capps described my audience as "a wildly cheering throng," which was nice from my point of view but obviously exaggerated, as anyone who has ever attended a Round Table must realize. But he wasn't exaggerating when he said I had "excoriated racing leaders for being unable or unwilling to compete in a market that is far more competitive than was the case 30 or 40 years ago."

And this was in 1986!

So, here we are now, another 32 years later, with competition of all forms that would have been unimaginable then, and this year's Round Table has just concluded. As it turned out, I didn't leave racing back then as I had anticipated I would, instead continuing to preach what I believe about marketing racing to the few who will listen. Therefore, I am somewhat stunned and surprised to agree with virtually everything reported this year at the Round Table as to "industry initiatives."

It's about time. And we can only hope it's not too late.

To begin with, how refreshing it is (for a change) to see no mention this year of The Jockey Club's self-destructive hatred of Lasix. Not that they've changed their minds, we know; but the salvation of racing and the Thoroughbred breed simply have so little connection to that battle of theirs. Public arguing about therapeutic medications or "performance enhancing drugs" is just unfathomably stupid. But their new McKinsey initiatives have everything to do with competing in the public marketplace for our share of gaming!

Their thrusts this year concern dramatically ramping up racing's ability to compete for fans in the modern era. Deep commitment on topics like "digital fan development and engagement," and "advanced analytics" is music to my old ears, as is emphasizing the importance of the track experience in developing new fans. Serious consideration today of fixed-odds betting and flexible takeout is about 30 years late, but so what? At least now we're talking! Credit The Jockey Club for this, as well as their interest in what we can learn from the British.

Labor Day weekend I was at Sandown Park outside London. What a treat! A day there, or at Del Mar, or Saratoga, or Keeneland, drives home the importance of the on-track experience. But we must realize in the United States, once and for all, that off-track betting isn't going anywhere (except toward new and more powerful competitors), and we must finally and thoroughly capitalize on what it can bring to us, not what it takes from us.

To be sure, enormous mistakes were made and even more enormous opportunities missed in how it was implemented here and elsewhere. Crying about it won't change anything. Instead, we must learn how to capitalize on and invest in marketing a distribution system that has penetrated the population almost entirely. Just think of that. According to Pew Research, 77% of Americans already own a smartphone. While I dislike how much harder that seems to make marketing the on-track experience in the short term, I love how much opportunity it could provide for funding synergistic marketing of both!

Locally, regionally, and nationally, however, racing is still not competing. Those of us in the game tend to assume everyone knows you can bet the races on your phone or via the Internet. Sadly, so little effective marketing has been done for racing over the last decade or two that the sport isn't even on the regular menu of interest for all but the tiniest fraction of the population. The only way to change that is with a massive commitment to remarketing it, preferably coordinated among the major stakeholders, or at least complementary among them as competitors for the gaming dollar.

I once called it "positive competition" as we witnessed the old marketing wars among California rivals Santa Anita and Hollywood Park, as well as Bay Meadows and Golden Gate. Why? Because when rivals try to out-do each other, not only does the market respond, but the market's awareness of what's on offer rises dramatically. Just think what could happen if racing's major American entities – the Stronach Group, Churchill Downs, New York Racing Association, The Jockey Club, and the Breeders' Cup – made concerted, competitive national advertising and marketing investments to sell betting on the races to the enormous population of smartphone and Internet users who don't even know it exists.

Authentic wild cheering and an avalanche of new business. T