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IN SEARCH OF ...



I've always thought racing is the world's greatest sport for many reasons, chief among them the fact that human and animal are united in an athletic contest that mirrors and condenses "real life" in every single race.

The struggle to compete, and to win, with the outcome unknowable in advance. Potentially accessible to and witnessed (and participated in) by the entire range of humanity, from most to least exalted, almost all of which can bet on the outcome. With the resulting winners and losers. And all the possible ramifications of that, financial and otherwise.

Add to that the track's abundant social life, especially on race days, the beauty and majesty of horses and so many of racing's settings, not to mention the sport's sheer entertainment value ... it's hard to believe that it's struggling to survive in much of America.

Particularly California.

How can this be so? I'm searching for answers. Reasons. And outcomes? Every individual race, after all, presents the same challenge, a search—in microcosm.

All of us should also be searching for solutions to the serious problems our sport faces, if it is to endure. Let alone prosper.

In this vein, there could be no greater tribute to the late, esteemed, and highly accomplished Ed Bowen, than finally to act with sincerity on his 1991 plea, if it isn't already too late ... that "leadership by narrow vision should be replaced by a sense of common goals." Nearly thirty-five years ago, in a very important sense, he predicted what has now befallen us, particularly in the Golden State, owing to a pronounced failure to reject the "narrow vision" of our sport's leadership. Especially since that deficient, occluded vision has now metastasized, with very predictable results.

There can be little doubt than an utter failure to embrace effective strategic planning (including "a sense of common goals" among all of the sport's interdependent parts) has led California racing to the precipice. Are other major jurisdictions, such as Florida, far behind?

It didn't have to be this way. In the early 1980s, California and particularly Santa Anita racing were on the crest of a dynamic wave of strong, even record-breaking business, powered by investments in marketing, management, and new technology. The public companies which owned California's major tracks were future-oriented. I vividly remember Robert Strub leading lengthy discussions among what have become known as racing's "stakeholders," including owner/trainer representation of course, and legislators, to assess our weaknesses and the potential future threats to our success. As a member of Santa Anita's management myself at the time, I knew first-hand the projected value of our 440 acres; we sought to inspire and elaborate a business plan that would protect the future of racing while at the same time carefully developing the property from its perimeter inward, with training and stabling to be increasingly located elsewhere, principally at Pomona's protected county property.

The details, plausibility, and ultimate strategic viability of any ancient planning are not what's important now, in California or elsewhere. What is important is the "sense of common goals" we had then, as opposed to the "narrow vision" which continues to afflict us now, and even threatens our once-vibrant communities in California and Florida particularly.

The Strubs of Santa Anita—Dr. Charles Strub and his son Bob—were known above all else for their unflinching and rock-solid integrity. Some of their positions and

initiatives were unpopular, but they were never shy about

expressing the reasons for them, and sharing those reasons and their vision with their interdependent partners in the sport, while always considering counterpoints. Above all, they taught the gospel that Bowen espoused: "The approach that, *Without us, there would be no game*, stands in the way of progress. It is a simplistic approach, blinkered on both sides, for it is so self-evident in every case that it hardly bears repeating."

However, that very simplistic and blinkered approach Bowen cited decades ago, wherein track ownership makes decisions in a vacuum, then dictates to everyone else, whether legislators, regulators, owners, trainers, breeders, jockeys, fans, or media, is what has brought us to the edge. Along with their well-documented failures to honor commitments, conflicting and even rival statements from within the same company management, and a revolving door of inexperienced and inept "leaders."

Do all successful businesses "win" because they see the future so well, better than their competitors? Consider that the particularly difficult enterprise of racing, in all its aspects, especially risk, is essentially future-oriented—it begins with breeding race horses, with the annual foal crop. That fact alone requires knowledgeable track ownerships to comprehend where racing is headed many years in advance, based on objective evidence. And it mandates sophisticated guidance to tracks by breeders, trainers, and owners, whose own interdependent businesses require understanding of critical trends, that may not be readily apparent to others. Especially to any track owner who chooses to operate and make decisions about their racing enterprises in a vacuum, rather than with an objective, truly experienced strategic team.

When track ownership is apparently immune to the true interests of the human and equine populations on whose backs their profits have been generated ... when its highly compensated managers and representatives either pretend to listen to other viewpoints or don't even try ... is it any wonder that all the rest of us are left to search the skies for the answers we seek, or possibly even divine intervention? **T**