

IFHA SPEECH - STEPHEN MORAN

Not so long ago, in most parts of the world there were only two to three mainstream sports.

The sports which commanded huge audiences and massive mainstream media exposure.

Football, in its various forms, and racing were top of the tree.

Thesedays, from a media perspective, football has maintained - if not grown - its profile while a number of other sports have increased their exposure.

The harsh reality is that racing - generally speaking - has not done so.

Why? Largely, administrative complacency and a failure to respond to a changing landscape.

My home state Victoria provides an excellent microcosm of the situation. For forty plus years from 1961 it basked in the glory of the return (about six cents in the dollar) from an industry owned TAB which had hundreds of off-course outlets and faced no competition from corporate bookmakers and betting exchanges. That is no longer the case. Nor, alas, is the TAB still industry owned.

As a young racing journalist I vividly recall being repeatedly told by racing club executives - 'don't worry about the decline in attendance, look at this revenue we are generating off course.'

I do not blame them. I'm sure I would have been seduced in the same way.

The problem, of course, is that if you don't worry about attendances then you do not help spawn a new generation of fans and the only measure by which most sports editors and television producers judge the level of interest is 'bums on seats'.

So what we do? In my view, racing needs to underpin its future based on RE-INVENT, RE-ESTABLISH and RE-ENGAGE.

It is not acceptable for the industry at large to assert that 'we're doing ok' given the greater competition we face compared to 20 or 30 years ago.

Other major sports - our competitors - have similarly faced but countered such increased competition.

How have they done this?

They have marketed better than we have and better exploited the media including that incredible mass marketing tool - television. They have maintained a much higher mainstream media presence. They have reinvented some of what they do.

Rugby's World Cup, topical at present, is just 24 years old. The English Premier

League even younger - established in 1992. The expanded Champions League dates back only to the late 80's. Twenty - twenty cricket is just eight years old.

In doing so, these sports managed to reaffirm their place in the mainstream psyche of the man (or woman) in the street. In the case of cricket, you could argue that position was reestablished. It attracted a new audience to the shorter version of the game and managed to re-engage them.

I do not subscribe to the theory that we have missed the boat. We simply need a faster one propelled by some new thinking and a preparedness to better court - if not fund - relationships with the mainstream media....as we re-invent and re-engage.

Horse racing does it's major days as well, if not better, than other sports.

We do not make enough of what could be our simplest marketing catchcry - 'everybody loves a day at the races'.

Few events draw the numbers which attend the Kentucky Derby, Japan Cup and Melbourne spring carnival. Not to mention the outstanding meetings in Hong Kong, Singapore, England, South Africa and the weekend's racing we've just savoured,

Naturally a high percentage of attendees on these days are 'party-goers' but what do we do to turn them into racing enthusiasts? Very little, I fear.

Do we adequately research the party-goers to determine what might bring them back? Do we woo them with a raft of special offers?

Do we woo them as owners? Do we educate them with a simple (but not simplistic) guide to the nuances of assessing the form and betting.

Once you seduce anyone with the intellectual challenge of doing the form, you have them for life. And the inclination to back their judgement, however modestly, will automatically follow.

Increasing our customer base is surely a fundamental goal.

We have a captive audience on our major days - we must re-engage them.

Fundamental to this objective, I believe, is to reinvent what we do outside the major days and pursue strategies to re-establish the sport as mainstream via the media.

Most major sporting events, now cricket included, do not endeavour to hold the audience beyond two to three hours. This does not necessarily have to mean fewer races on any program (although I advocate this outside major meetings) but simply that they are condensed - no more than 15 to 20 minutes apart to create more action and a greater sense of sporting occasion.

The best race of the day should be the last. Every other sport, not to mention theatre or concert, builds to a climax.

The level of information, now available to off course viewers all around the world, must be available on course. This to me is critical. Drove of heartland enthusiasts - call them semi serious punters - now stay away for fear of missing vital information amid all the distractions on-course...principally odds movement from all outlets and assessment of track bias or racing pattern on the day.

What financial incentives do we offer to be on course?

Simplified betting types in line with sports betting are desirable. Head to head betting - trainer, jockey or horse. A trainer or jockey bet type which, with one ticket, gives you a combination bet on all their runners or rides.

The introduction of 'frequent flyer' programs for on-course regulars. Perhaps a world racing passport to provide privileges around the planet for owners, punters and enthusiasts.

The growth of international racing has been a significant step forward in recent years but it can be further enhanced by giving punters a greater 'connect' through an industry sponsored International Racing Website which would feature live vision of the world's major races and form-guides massaged into a style which suits what punters are used to reading in their various jurisdictions - linked with the advance of commingling.

Restoring racing to the mainstream is our biggest and, probably, most difficult challenge. One which may demand us to speculate in order to accumulate.

We are kidding ourselves if we think that Frankie Dettori and Christophe Soumillon are household names in the manner of Beckham or Messi.

Reinventing our profile and reestablishing our mainstream status simply demands free-to-air television exposure in my view.

Not simply or necessarily live racing but it's inclusion in other program genres.

Perhaps as an industry we need to produce the documentaries on Frankel and Black Caviar for dissemination to networks around the world. We members of the media do like to be hand-fed.

I wholeheartedly agree with US Jockey Club president James Gagliano's recent comment that 'racing's absence from national television severely hurts its ability to attract new fans.'

Ideally the extension of the International Racing website is the creation of a weekly television program which provides a comprehensive update of every major race around the globe.

I would hope we can, as a united group, continue to lobby to ease quarantine restrictions and further develop international competition which perhaps embraces a new category of race beyond Gr 1. An IPG - International Premium Group 1 or WCR

- World Championship Race.

Let's make some dreams a reality. A Breeders Cup in both hemispheres; one international raceday which might encompass a dozen Group 1 races at, say, six different venues around the globe over a 12 or 24 hour period.

An international jockeys series along the lines of the champions league - the top two from all the major jurisdictions competing bi-monthly at different tracks around the globe; and the establishment of insured or industry funded bonuses for international winners, not within one year but over a period of two to three years to provide an incentive for the great horses to stay on the track.

We must breed to race - not the other way around. We must strategise the retention of our better horses rather than lose them prematurely to the major stallion farms who are the biggest winners in world racing. But that's a debate for another day.

Further, I would argue that if we have to pay to secure mainstream newspaper coverage (beyond that which is buried at the back of the sports pages) then so be it.

I cannot stress enough that those with the decision-making power in the media, judge any interest in racing by week to week crowds and not by racing's TV audience or the volume of people having a bet.

I have no issue with paying jockeys and trainers to represent the industry outside racedays where most now see and fulfil their obligation to promote the industry.

I have no issue with race clubs or governing bodies employing a PR consultant whose sole task is to ensure that racing's key players are exposed in the mainstream media.

Not so long ago, I remember being asked by a group of Italians whether I knew any famous sportsmen.

I replied that there was probably a few Australians but the names would mean nothing to them. "Then, I said a ha...Frankie Dettori," I was greeted by blank looks. Alarming!

Of course, most other major sports have one distinct advantage over racing. That sense of belonging, that sense of tribalism in supporting your club or national fervour in supporting your country.

To that end, I will seriously argue that is time for us to dispense with the archaic practice of jockeys wearing the owner's colours.

Domestically each stable should have its own colours and, internationally, horses should carry their national colours.

The best analogy we can draw is motor racing. Ferrari, for example, has millions of loyal followers sporting their colours and yet only a small percentage I imagine actually own a Ferrari and even fewer have any direct involvement with the racing team.

There may well be a huge merchandising opportunity with apparel and memorabilia linked to stable colours. This can be a constant rather than relying on whichever God you believe in to send us a Frankel or Black Caviar.

I suspect this has to be driven by clubs and tracks or governing bodies rather than by the stables themselves.

Stable membership should be developed. Not necessarily as an owner but simply as a fan...and fostered through social media.

I leave you with a brief video - showing a couple of Australian trainers who are exploring these paths. One perhaps a little more light-hearted than the other.

Such promotion - on a wider and more formalised scale - could well form a part of the strategies we need to undertake. Thank you very much.