

A Proposal



By Matt Darby

IN THE YEARS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING WORLD War II, the three most popular sports in America were baseball, boxing and horse racing, in no particular order. That's an astonishing fact for many Americans, as only one of those – baseball – is still in the top three, and it's not first. Hoofbeats became lost in an ever-more crowded cacophony of competing entertainment, and horse racing quickly lost ground as the least-accessible option. Remember that word: accessible.

Virtually every problem modern horse racing faces is one of accessibility. Conversations at AQHA have gone unchanged for years: "We need to make handicapping simpler ... we have to encourage more ownership ... tracks need higher attendance ... how can the have-nots compete without slots?" At every layer of the business, from manufacturing (breeders) to wholesaling (owners and trainers) to retail outlets (tracks) to consumers (bettors), there is no easy point of entry – no welcome invitation. Consider how much of our industry lies outside the reach of tracks, horsemen and fans:

- Handicapping is very difficult for new bettors to understand and adopt.
- Almost all potential customers must live in a city with live racing.
- Tracks are expensive to build, maintain and operate.
- There are enormous economic and logistical barriers to entry for would-be racehorse owners.
- The modern track's business model relies on subsidies, generally — though not exclusively — in the form of slot revenue.

I will not add more ink to the ocean of books and opinion pieces ruing the desperate state of horse racing. Rather, I propose a solution – one perfectly suited to the American Quarter Horse.

Enter match racing. Specifically, enter match racing results into the official AQHA records, thereby legitimizing a sport that's already being fanatically followed in yucca fields and prairies across the U.S. And I'm not suggesting we bring current fans in from the

boonies; that's unlikely, as they'd have nothing to do with us in the first place, even if we asked nicely. Quite the contrary; I'm suggesting AQHA allow the development of an entirely new fan base by essentially re-inventing a sport with the flick of a pen.

The first step is to amend the AQHA Handbook of Rules and Regulations to include conditions for two-horse races, then to begin recording the results of those races. AQHA would of course establish the same minimum standards for match races that already exist for full-field races, including track dimensions, quality control, drug testing and so on. In short, recognized and recorded match races would not run in the boonies, only at legitimate facilities, just like traditional racing.

So what's the point of all this? Where's the payoff? Once the rule changes are approved, existing tracks could begin scheduling match races overnight, but I think that's unlikely to happen soon on a large scale. No, the long-term benefit of legitimized match racing would be new track construction or rehabilitation. Don't laugh. Turn your thoughts back to baseball: If every small-town minor league club had to build Shea Stadium, none would. A less opulent structure with low overhead is what allows a small-market baseball team to exist.

Consider match racing to be our industry's potential minor league.

A purpose-built straightaway-only facility would cost less to construct and maintain. Less equipment and fewer employees are needed to maintain the racing surface. The toteboard and barns are smaller. You need fewer ponies, grooms, gatemens and jockeys, because only two horses race at one time.

In fact, almost all elements of a traditional racing operation would be much less expensive when applied to match racing. Drastically reduced overhead widens your profit margin, which means the business is less reliant on subsidy cash in the form of slots, corporate sponsors or generous breed associations (*abem*). Local sponsors, concessions and handle would keep you in the black, assuming the fans show up.

Ah yes, the fans. The fans who open a race program for the first time and promptly swallow their tongues. Is there a less approachable sport in America than horse racing? I can't think of one. (Soccer, maybe? But I don't believe any state legislatures are being asked to keep soccer afloat [CONTINUED ON PAGE 70]

Can we make Quarter

Horse racing grow

by returning it

to its roots?

FINISH LINE

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by legalizing slots.)

The surface simplicity of match racing makes it digestible for newcomers. Both handicapping and wagering instantly become simplified when there are only two horses in the equation. Fans won't be able to buy a ten-cent-superfecta-wheel-one-three-five-six-eight-key-the-three, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Again, accessibility is paramount, and a two-horse field means a better handicaps (a) which horse will win and (b) by how much. In fact, the point spread used in modern football wagering is perfectly adaptable to match racing. Imagine placing a wager on, "horse No. 1, by at least a neck," or, "horse No. 2, taking half a length." American sports bettors are already very comfortable with that style of wagering. Still, multiple-race exotics like the pick-six are possible on a card of match races, and would be much easier to win. And yes, two-horse fields are perfectly compatible with pari-mutuel wagering.

Another common complaint about horse racing that didn't necessarily warrant its own spot on the "problem list" above is the slow pace of a day at the races. Race goes – particularly novices – routinely say there is too much time between races. Match races are able to run, say, every 12 minutes rather than every 28. That's 20 races in four hours, and the track only had to bring in 40 horses to fill the day's entire schedule. Whether you're a fan or a track owner, that's a lot of entertainment per dollar spent.

Many of the horses that would run at these tracks would be local, and probably couldn't be claimed for \$5,000 at a county fair meet, but the racing and wagering opportunities would still be there. It is much easier to match a pair of comparable racehorses than it is to match eight or 10. It wouldn't matter that they're not very good. It would only matter that they're equally not very good. The occasional diamond in the rough would go on to fame and fortune, and his local fans would follow his progress through full-field racing.

Imagine dozens upon dozens of

such tracks sprinkled across the countryside, each drawing fans and horses from local stock. Import simulcast signals to most of these facilities, and the potential for increased nationwide handle is tremendous.

Full disclosure, before I wrap up: I am not a professional horseman. I was, in turns, a journalist and a sportscaster before landing at AQHA. But I know a bad business model when I see one. American Quarter Horse racing has hitched its wagon to, bizarrely, Thoroughbreds. With every doping or steroid scandal that nicks the Thoroughbred industry, so too are the Quarter Horses nicked. Every high-profile Thoroughbred breakdown indirectly drags Quarter Horses down with it. Our industry will rise and fall as the Thoroughbred industry does, unless we choose to recreate our own industry in our own image, one that benefits from the Quarter Horse's strengths rather than suffers because of Thoroughbred weaknesses.

Specific faults aside, consider this: If we do nothing, the best we can hope for is no change from the status quo. Which is to say, being roughly 10 percent of an industry in steep decline. We have shoehorned ourselves into a system that was designed by Thoroughbred horsemen to benefit Thoroughbred racing. We deserve more than their table scraps.

We must also consider that the relationship between slot revenue and purses is an artificial one, mandated by state legislatures who will inevitably find the slot machines more valuable than the horses, and order the two divorced. Would the American Quarter Horse racing industry survive such a move? Not under the current model. But a sport that survives apart from subsidies would live on.

This opportunity is open only to American Quarter Horses. Thoroughbreds are not numerous, versatile or – yes – accessible enough to provide a steady stream of product to dozens (perhaps hundreds) of

small tracks across the country. There will always be the multi-million dollar full-field Quarter Horse races at our biggest venues, but the base of the pillar should be small- and medium-market tracks fostering a love of the sport at a very personal, approachable level. I've attended perhaps half a dozen Texas Rangers baseball games in my life (Arlington is 350 miles away); I've been to hundreds of Amarillo Dillas games at Potter County Memorial Stadium. Because I can. They're accessible.

Matt Darby is AQHA's Assistant Manager of Marketing. He can be contacted at mdarby@aqha.org.