

A veterinarian unites the racing industry when it counts

Dr. Robert Lewis: The man behind the Texas race bill

By ANNE LANG

ELGIN, Texas—Dr. Robert Lewis, a 40-year-old veterinarian who has served as president of the Texas Horse Racing Association since early 1990, captured the respect and gratitude of horse industry leaders by unifying the state's breeding and racing organizations, which had been feuding for decades. Then he organized a formidable army of influential lawmakers, lobbyists, and horsemen, skillfully channeling their collective energies into an ambitious campaign during the recent legislative session.

The result: The state's five percent share of the parimutuel handle has been reduced to a sliding scale starting at one percent for the first \$100 million wagered at any racetrack, rising by one percent with each additional \$100 million, and leveling off at five percent when wagers exceed \$400 million.

On the sliding scale, seven percent will go toward purses initially, and the tracks will collect 10 percent of the handle — which is expected to enable developers of large-scale Class 1 tracks finally to attract investors in order to begin construction. Also included in the

bill are measures authorizing interstate and intrastate simulcasting, increases in state-bred award money, and the creation of an equine research fund.

"We wouldn't have gotten this bill passed without Bob Lewis," said Ed Dodwell, president of the Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association. "He spent countless hours reviewing and rewriting the legislation, studying the intricacies of simulcasting, and seeking advice from people all over the country."

If Lewis now knows more than most Texans about the inner workings of state government, it's not because he deliberately set out to acquire the knowledge.

"I'm not a political animal," Lewis said, "but enough people asked me to do this that I finally agreed — mostly because I felt that if I had something to contribute, it was the fact that I'm a pretty neutral person. I'm not partial to either Thoroughbreds or Quarter Horses, and I'm not trying to build a racetrack."

Born in Houston and raised in Natchitoches, La., Lewis spent his childhood days on the family farm, then was educated at Louisiana's

Northwestern State University. He was accepted in Louisiana State University's very first veterinary school class.

Lewis spent several summers working as a student intern at Dr. Charles Graham's Southwest Stallion Station and veterinary clinic in Elgin, Tex., then accepted an offer from Graham after receiving his veterinary degree in 1977. Two years later he became a partner in both enterprises.

While Lewis said he has little time for horses away from his practice, he is co-owner of High Brite, a \$1.1 million earner who is now at stud at Johnny Jones's Walmac International in Lexington, Ky., and of the French Group 1 winner Septieme Ciel, who stands at Jones's Two Creek Ranch in Fayetteville, Tex.

Veterinary career

For the past decade, Lewis has been renowned as one of America's foremost equine surgeons, with his skills in constant demand by horsemen across the country. An executive board member of the American Association of Equine Practitioners, Lewis was brought in



as a consultant when the Warmblood stallion Nureyev suffered a life-threatening hock injury in 1987. The horse recovered enough to remain a sound breeding stallion.

"There aren't too many Nureyevs in Texas," Lewis said, "although we sure have our share of traumatic injuries down here. When you're a veterinarian from a little town in central Texas and you're able to help with a major injury with a major horse, it makes you feel pretty good about the years you've put into your work."

These days, Lewis is also feeling good about the outcome of the racing bill.

"It's amazing that we got the legislators to pass a tax reduction bill in the face of a \$6 million deficit," he said. "We were not only successful, but overwhelmingly so. And that's to the credit of the sponsors, key legislators, and lobbyists who were on our team."

"If anybody asks what I did, I was a traffic cop, basically serving the function of keeping people informed of events as they unfolded. I was as naive as anybody could be going into this thing. I left a lot up to the lobbyists, because it was common sense to me that when you tackle something like this, you get yourself some professional help, and you listen to what they tell you."

Frank Brothers, trainer of the Preakness and Belmont winner Hansel (whom Lewis has treated at Two Creek and in Kentucky last year), is one of the many people who insist on giving Lewis the lion's share of credit for the new bill's passage. "For someone who didn't necessarily know his way around the legislature, he sure did a brilliant job," said Brothers, who has been friends with Lewis for 10 years. "Bob was the perfect guy to do this, because he can communicate with the big people as well as the little people and inspire them all to move. He's a first-class guy, a gentleman, and a real go-getter."

'He's a real go-getter'

Lewis laid the groundwork early on in his THRA presidency, establishing a harmonious foundation on which to build a full-scale, united effort at the Texas Capitol by first restructuring the THRA bylaws and broadening the scope of the board of directors.

"I wanted to open up the association to where we could be as representative of the entire industry as possible, and to give everybody a voice in the decision-making process," Lewis said. "The number one priority seemed to be to try to get the horse people all under one umbrella. We were never going to get anything done in the Legislature

unless we all had one common agenda. So my game plan was to get all these people under one roof and lock them in here until we got to agreeing. That was the hardest challenge."

Battle continues

Lewis points out that the political aspects of Texas's new laws are by no means resolved for good.

"This fight's not over with," he said. "We've got to keep working to keep these laws intact and to do everything right. There's just no other untapped market like Texas, anywhere. We've got to maintain a vigil and keep ourselves represented at the Capitol in the years to come. Hopefully, we've taught ourselves a memorable lesson - that it doesn't help for the horsemen to be

fragmented. "I believed this was the one thing we could do to cause a significant turnaround in the Texas horse business. It's sad to me to watch what's happened in the last six or seven years, with the failed economy, the busted oil business, and the effect all that's had on a bunch of good horse people. Oil's not going to come back like the old days again, and the economy is slow to recover. But if we start pouring concrete for Class 1 tracks, at least psychologically everybody's going to pick their heads up again and do things the way Texans are known for doing things."

Anne Lang, an Austin freelance writer, is former editor of Texas Thoroughbred magazine.



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Dr. Robert Lewis was key to the passage of a Texas race bill.

