

Struggling for Unity

By Anne Lang

Attracting a standing-room-only crowd at the Jan. 16 Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association annual meeting in Austin was a two-hour panel discussion featuring principals from five Texas racetracks. During the program, participants outlined their respective goals for survival in an industry where growing competition from outside gambling forces is threatening the existence of numerous tracks across the United States.

Edward Duffy, president and chief executive officer of Arlington International, also contributed to the round-table session, which was moderated by Ray Paulick, editor of *The Blood-Horse*. Representing Texas' three Class I tracks (all of which remain in pre-construction stages) were Robert Quigley, president and chief operating officer of Retama Park near San Antonio; Ken Pearson, president of Sam Houston Race Park near Houston; and Preston Carter, chairman of the Lone Star Jockey Club located between Dallas and Fort Worth.

Completing the panel were officials from the state's two existing Class II tracks: Billy Bowers, general manager of Bandera Downs near San Antonio, and Jack Lenavitt, vice president and co-owner of Trinity Meadows near Fort Worth.

In his remarks, Duffy stressed the importance of maintaining unity among the various racing and breeding factions as a measure of defense against added gaming options—a strategy that paid off recently in Illinois, where efforts by a multi-breed horsemen's coalition successfully blocked the emergence of casino gambling.

"Never let your guard down and think that once you've built these tracks, you're safe—because you're not," Duffy warned. He pointed to the lottery and dog racing as competition for the betting dollar in Texas.

"Riverboats are just a precursor to the inevitable: casinos," Duffy predicted.

Pearson said he was optimistic about

the future of Sam Houston Race Park, slated to open in the fall of 1994. His projections were based in part on the success of the recently opened Gulf Greyhound Park near Houston, which during its first month of operation averaged \$602,826 in handle and 6,062 in attendance. Also, Pearson said, studies have shown that more lottery tickets are sold in Harris County than anywhere else in the state.

"This bodes well for the Houston market," Pearson stated. "It certainly won't be good news for Louisiana Downs, Remington, Vinton, and the Fair Grounds." He admitted, however, that the proliferation of additional wagering options during the first few years of Class I racing "would be a killer."

Regarding the planned opening of Lone Star Jockey Club in the fall of 1994, Carter said he was confident, buoyed by the city of Grand Prairie's recent decision to enact on April 1 a half-cent local sales tax expected to generate up to \$65 million to finance the track. He said he is unperturbed by currently pending lawsuits filed by three losing applicants for the license, all of which seek a reopening of the hearing process. "As far as I'm concerned, they (opponents) can catch lightning in a jar easier than they can win this thing," Carter said.

The former chief executive at Garden State Park, Quigley echoed Duffy's urging for solidarity, and offered his formula for success as "an intrastate circuit with no overlapping breeds. Intrastate wagering can't really work when two tracks are offering the same breed of horse."

Quigley announced Retama Park's pledge to promote racing as "good family fun," as well as providing maximum purses to keep the owners involved, and making sure patrons are the No. 1 priority. Alluding to the future of the national industry, Quigley said that while the almost inevitable phenomenon of track shutdowns will occur, the end result may actually be positive, in that it will reduce the present dilemma of too many overlapping race meetings.

Bowers emphasized the significant

impact simulcasting has had on Bandera's survival, describing it as "a key factor toward boosting the purses for live racing," and its role in filling the gap between live races.

Although he blamed the state lottery's arrival for a reduction of more than 20% in Bandera's overall handle and attendance in 1992, Bowers said he feels Texas' Class II tracks will prevail as a place for horses which are less than Class I quality to compete. As a means of expanding the racing market and educating the public, Bowers suggested exploring the possibility of installing off-track betting parlors in areas of the state which are particularly remote to racetracks, such as West Texas.

Trinity's outspoken Lenavitt blasted the media for being critical of shortcomings at his facility, which has experienced high personnel turnover, conflicts with trainers and jockeys, and recurring track surface problems. He described his vision of all elements in the racing industry—including members of the media—as planets in a harmonious solar system, or as part of a big "family."

"When a family member criticizes another family member, the outside world takes delight," said Lenavitt, whose executive committee earlier this year permanently banned from the press box a Fort Worth Turf writer for "specious and inappropriate reporting."

After describing Trinity Meadows' future as including "a re-dedication of its owners and management team, better horses, better crowds, and better handle," Lenavitt endorsed the push for unity among Texas racing factions.

Upon hearing this, Carter promptly challenged Lenavitt's commitment to such an ideal, since Trinity Meadows is among the losing applicants for a North Texas Class I license who are filing suit against the Lone Star decision. The men's brief exchange went as follows:

Carter: "How is your lawsuit helping the Texas industry move forward?"

Lenavitt: "The race is not over until the horses cross the finish line."

Carter: "But I've already won."

Lenavitt: No response. ■