

REGIONAL NEWS

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Panelists split on casino gaming

By ANNE LANG

Special to Daily Racing Form

HOUSTON - Can world-class racing survive in the 21st century without alternative forms of gaming as purse supplements? Absolutely not, say two out of three nationally prominent horsemen - while a third one passionately argues that it can indeed survive.

The question was posed during an equine section forum at the International Livestock Congress last week. Taking the former stance were Hollywood Park owner R.D. Hubbard and Sam Houston Race Park general manager Robert Bork. Supplying the counterpoint was longtime Kentucky breeder Arthur B. Hancock 3d.

"Nobody likes change in racing, but if we don't change, the world around us will change without us," warned Hubbard. "And (if wedded with horseracing), alternative forms of gaming will affect positive change in a big way."

Hubbard speaks from personal experience, as Hollywood Park was authorized to open a cards-only casi-

no in July 1994. He said the casino now is California's largest simulcasting outlet. While horsemen don't get a cut of the casino profits (they opted not to early on), Hubbard said they do benefit in that about 35 percent of the people who come to play cards also bet on Hollywood's races, which are televised in the card room.

"It makes sense that cards and race betting work well together," he stated, "because they involve the same kind of mentality. Both require some mental calculation, and both offer competition among the bettors."

Hubbard also cited the drastically elevated across-the-board statistics that have evolved at other tracks such as Delaware Park and Iowa's Prairie Meadows, both of which now are casino-integrated. Conversely, he pointed out that another one of his own tracks, The Woodlands in Kansas, has been hurt by the advent of casinos in surrounding states.

Hubbard voiced his support for the concept of interactive home wagering, dismissing the fear of some that if horseracing is brought to people's homes, they'll stop going to the track. A resounding answer to that debate,

he said, is the evolution of the VCR.

"VCRs didn't end up killing the (theater-house) movie business, like everyone thought they would," he reasoned. "Instead, they enhanced the market, because so many more people were being exposed to the film genre. The same thing would likely happen with racing."

Hubbard's advice to other states that are trying to unite alternative gaming options with racing: "Get everything written into law - don't leave anything up for negotiation."

Bork essentially echoed Hubbard's statements, adding his own views.

"To stay competitive, we have to offer a variety of choices," he said. "People want a gambling supermarket - a one-stop shopping location. We have to get past the Victorian notion that horseracing is somehow more pure than other forms of gambling, because the customers don't see it that way. To them, racing is just another blip on the gambling radar screen."

"I'd rather be a gambling partner than an opponent," Bork went on. "If you can't beat 'em, well, you know the rest. Right now, there are count-

less Texans who drive right past Sam Houston Race Park every day on their way to gamble on the Louisiana riverboats. We should never forget that the core of our business is racing, but we need to do all we can to ensure that the business survives."

Hancock shared Bork and Hubbard's enthusiasm for the home wagering concept (and the establishment of an industry clearinghouse, such as the proposed National Thoroughbred Association). But linking horseracing with other types of gambling "could cripple and even destroy us," since racing would be putting itself at risk for possible termination down the road, he said.

"There's a big difference between gambling and wagering," Hancock stated. "Gambling is solely a game of chance. Wagering is an educated prediction. Gambling and wagering (entities) have entirely different agendas. We are a wagering sport, and we need to protect that sport's pageantry, beauty, tradition and nobility."

Hancock said his primary concern is: "What happens when alternative gambling is in place, and horserac-



HANCOCK: Stop 'gouging' the fans.

ing is getting a nice cut from it, but suddenly everyone else decides they want a share, too? Why should racing be granted the lofty status of being the sole sport that benefits? We need to keep these alternative gaming forces out of our fort. They don't come bearing flowers, believe me."

His solution: "Tracks need to stop gouging patrons (for parking, admission, etc.) and reach out to the public, become more consumer-friendly. We need to clean up our image."