

Like it or not, NYRA needs Aqueduct

By Bob Ehalt
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If a national poll was taken on the nation's best racetracks, it's unlikely that Aqueduct would rank in the top 10.

From an aesthetic viewpoint, if you put the three New York Racing Association venues in a beauty contest, the Big A is the one that would finish up the track behind Saratoga and Belmont.

Aqueduct, quite frankly, is little more than a highly functional home for New York racing during its slowest parts of the year.

Yet if New York Governor Andrew Cuomo gets his way and Aqueduct is eventually closed to make room for a massive Convention Center, racing fans will learn the hard way that they've been taking the Big A for granted.

As much as the sport could survive by racing purely at Belmont and Saratoga, it will not thrive while spending 46 out of the year's 52 weeks at Belmont.

Removing logistics from the equation -- it would cost hundreds of millions to winterize Belmont, where the grandstand is not even positioned properly to draw heat from the sun -- Belmont's lack of a subway stop would make it a ghost town, especially during the winter.

A 10-month Belmont meet would also make the racing season mundane. While it may not match the excitement of opening day at Yankee Stadium and Citi Field, one of the cool things for fans in April is knowing the shifting of racing to Belmont, not to mention the arrival of spring and the Triple Crown that comes with it, is right around the corner.

OK, we'll amend that. Looking over the Mets' roster, there might be more of a buzz at Belmont Park than Citi Field this spring.

Yet, forgetting the Wilponsømess for a while, what's more important than the way two tracks will impact the flow of the racing season, for its long-term good NYRA cannot afford to distance itself from the casino.

Cuomo's interest in Aqueduct has nothing to do with racing or that Ozone Park is the ideal geographic spot to bring millions of visitors. At time when tax dollars are dwindling, his eyes are riveted on the dollar signs of the casino and the way it has become a magnet for visitors.

Right now, a king's ransom of cash from the casino flows into NYRA's coffers, but take

away the umbilical cord that bonds Aqueduct and the Resorts World Casino New York City and one day another politician might start to question why so many dollars go to racing. With the obvious link between the track and casino erased, political leaders will no doubt point to the small crowds at Belmont and insist too much money goes to a sport that no one cares about.

That's the way it goes with politicians. Give them the opportunity to divert revenue so it can suit their own needs, and they'll take it.

Not helping matters is that as time goes on, Genting, which operates the casino, figures to have far more clout than NYRA because of the \$10 million or more per week in profit it generates.

To prevent that imbalance of power from growing at a faster rate, the casino and the racetrack must remain a coupled entry. Even if the racetrack is dark for half the year, NYRA needs the crowds and activity that the casino brings, plus the revenue, and it cannot let its life preserver out of its sight.

Barely three months into the life of the casino, Gov. Cuomo has already showed casino cash means more to him than the racing industry by presenting a plan that would ultimately evict Aqueduct from the grounds.

Now just imagine the situation 10 years from now and the political pressures on the sport with the nearest track some 25 miles away from the casino. Believe it or not, you'll miss Aqueduct.