

Future bright for New York racing



By Paul Moran
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These are not yet the best of times in the realm of racing in New York. They are yet to come. But the worst of times are but a grim memory. The future from here appears to be without boundary. When will they pave the parking lots with gold?

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For those who have for years endured from both sides of the rail the trials of racing at Aqueduct, the literally leaking roofs, quirky heating, indefinitely deferred maintenance and a facility that was an unintentional tribute to filth, the reincarnation remains a bit uncomfortable, a study in contrast, two distinctly different worlds cheek to jowl. The racing side of the plant remains almost untouched; a witness to the past, but with the opening of a lavish new tri-level gambling hall, there is an unmistakable change in atmosphere and attitude, undeniable electricity. Horseplayers still congregate here, separated from casino patrons by a short distance and miles of sensibility.

Passing from what remains of the former Aqueduct Race Track, now re-branded as Resort World New York City at Aqueduct, into the new casino is like walking through a looking glass. Leave one world behind and enter another, a wonderland of light and sound. There is access to the racetrack from the ground level of the casino, but no other evidence that horse racing is in progress; many televisions but none that show the races. Still, the impact of the casino is huge and unmistakably important to the future of the pari-mutuel operation it now overshadows.

The initial transformation takes many forms. The claiming game in New York, for instance, has taken a form close to day-trading. In an 18-day period following the Christmas break, 116 horses were claimed for a total of almost \$2 million in something close to a game of musical stalls. Multiple claims, the eventual new owner determined by lottery, a process known as a "shake," have become the norm rather than the exception. New York-bred yearlings are in demand and the state's breeders await a 50-percent increase in their share of the windfall. There is no respite on the horizon, only acceleration. The initial infusion of casino cash yielded purse increases of as much as 40 percent and this is just the beginning. Only the tip of this iceberg has revealed itself. The challenge now confronting the racing community is preserving and building upon a growing wave of momentum in a rapidly changing climate.

The governor, Andrew Cuomo, last week introduced a proposal that, if successful, will amend the state's constitution to permit full-blown casino gambling, which is now conducted legally only by Native American tribes exempt from restriction. Technically, racetrack-based casinos are arms of the state lottery. Cuomo has taken note of the array of gambling enterprises that surround New York, a state, like many others, strangled by

public employee and teachers' unions and desperate for money. Opposing his logic is indeed difficult though the expansion of gambling will eventually reach the point of diminishing return.

A successful journey through the legislative labyrinth even if unopposed will require about three years. A constitutional amendment requires passage by two separately elected legislatures and a public referendum. Nevertheless, Cuomo, without mention of racing, envisions construction of the nation's largest convention center and an array of other facilities on the Aqueduct site. The Malaysian firm that has executed the transformation and operates the casino has expressed its willingness to fund the necessary alterations to conduct winter racing at Belmont Park. There is no guarantee that the future of Queens includes thoroughbred racing. Nevertheless, the financial tools generated by the casino in Queens put in the right hands will have a profound impact of the sport's future in New York. The manner in which these tools are employed remains to be seen and at this point there appears to be no clear plan or vision.

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Living well on an abundance of crumbs is all too easy. The task of preserving racing's place and raising its profile on this ever changing landscape falls to the New York Racing Association. With prosperity comes the duty to promote aggressively and creatively what, if it is not already, will inevitably become the nation's best racing product, to restore and preserve the long-neglected Belmont facility and bolster its most valuable franchise -- Saratoga. A nonprofit entity has no excuse to not spend every available dollar on capital improvement and promotion.

Racing interests here are duty-bound and now have the tools to buttress the sport and the industry, to cement its importance as a cultural and economic force in every part of the state and expand its sphere of influence in the communities in which it operates. The tail must not be permitted to wag the dog. The NYRA must not stand impassively while New York becomes a larger version of Pennsylvania or West Virginia. The opportunity is at hand to foster a new age of racing in New York, not as gilded perhaps as it once may have been, but nevertheless beyond anything seen here -- or anywhere in America -- in many decades.

Paul Moran is a two-time winner of the Media Eclipse Award, and has received various honors from the National Association of Newspaper Editors, Society of Silurians, Long Island Press Club and Long Island Veterinary Medical Association. He also has been given the Red Smith Award for his coverage of the Kentucky Derby. Paul can be contacted at pmoran1686@aol.com.