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Commentary: The horse racing industry must increase racial diversity

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A series of troubling events over the past year led to a long-overdue social justice reckoning for our nation, causing nearly every industry to reevaluate its cultures and daily practices.

The horse racing industry has not been immune to this phenomenon, with the coronavirus pandemic and criminal justice crisis combining to highlight, yet again, the deep-seated racial inequities in the proverbial Sport of Kings.

We have a lot of work to do to change that, but we are making progress. I was proud to be appointed last December to serve as the first Black executive director of the New York Thoroughbred Breeders (NYTB), which enhances the status of Empire State-breds and promotes the economic contributions of breeders and the racing industry. I'm also pleased to add my voice to the New York Racing Association board of directors.

My love of the sport started with my uncle, who was a small Florida breeder. When I immigrated to the Sunshine State from Jamaica at the age of 11 with my family, we shared my uncle's enthusiasm for racing and regularly accompanied him to the track. There is a longstanding horse racing tradition in the Caribbean, where it is the rule, not the exception, to see jockeys, owners and trainers of color.

Unfortunately, that's not the standard in the U.S., where there are a handful of Black riders on the racing circuit, and just one - Kendrick Carmouche — in New York. Black owners are even fewer and further between, and there is a paucity of Black representation at the sport's highest echelons of management, boards and executive leadership.

This was not always the case — especially when it came to jockeys. In racing's early days, Black jockeys not only participated in the sport, but dominated it, winning 15 of the first 28 Kentucky Derby races held. The Jim Crow laws changed that, and the increasingly insular nature of racing has ensured the backsliding that began in the post-Civil War era never reversed.

The industry must take a more proactive approach to attract people of color into the field and help them advance. We could, for example, partner with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) on internships and externships that bring new people into racing and also encourage minority backstretch workers who want to advance and provide them with assistance to do so.

This effort is underway, thanks to bloodstock agent Greg Harbut, the only Black owner with a horse in the 2020 Kentucky Derby. In January, Harbut started a lecture series at Wilberforce University, an HBCU outside Dayton, Ohio, to educate students about careers in racing.

“We have to make a strategic effort to go out and target people of color and market to people of color,” Harbut told *Thoroughbred Daily News*.

I couldn't agree more. We must work to raise awareness about the sport and the opportunities it presents. To that end, NYTB, the New York Racing Association, and the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association have launched “We Are New York Horse Racing,” a campaign highlighting the economic importance of the state's horse racing industry and the wide diversity of women and men who make it run.

Horse racing is responsible for \$3 billion in annual economic impact and 19,000 jobs statewide. Those jobs range from the obvious equine-related positions - grooms, trainers, hot walkers, jockeys and more - to the plumbers, electricians, security guards, tellers and dozens of others without whom racing could not operate.

These men and women working behind the scenes hail from a variety of countries, states and socioeconomic backgrounds. But they have one thing in common: a love of horses and horse racing. It's time we told their stories and brought them out of the shadows into the spotlight.

Najja Thompson is executive director of the New York Thoroughbred Breeders.