

Cowan takes reins New consortium COO is bullish on Fort Erie Race Track

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May 13, 2010

There's a new man in charge at the Fort Erie Race Track.

The Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium has chosen a new chief operating officer who is no stranger to either the consortium or the race track.

Rick Cowan is no stranger to Fort Erie, having spent 18 years with the Ontario Jockey Club, one time owners of the 113-year-old border oval, from 1976 to 1994 in positions ranging from executive assistant to chief operating officer and executive vice president.

"I remember the halcyon days," Cowan told Fort Erie councillors after he was introduced at Monday's regular council meeting by consortium chief executive officer Jim Thibert a scant six hours after Cowan signed his name on the dotted line.

"We had a jockey's championship with jockeys from California and Canada in 1978. We had big names like Laffit Pincay, Willie Shoemaker (from the United States), Sandy Hawley and Robin Platts. There was 18,000 people in the grandstand."

After working with the OJC, Cowan moved on to several positions with Autotote Enterprises, since renamed Scientific Games, which supplies pari-mutuel wagering systems to the horse racing industry worldwide. Cowan's work with the company had him posted in both North America and Europe until he left the company in 2002 to become an industry consultant.

Cowan admitted that the road ahead for the venerable Bertie Street facility is a tough one but said he is up to the task of bringing the track back to its former glory. But he also said that challenge is one of the reasons why he was attracted.

"One reason I was really interested in the job is I have a passion for thoroughbred racing."

He said he realizes the turnaround isn't going to happen overnight and that he plans to take some time to get a feel for the job and look and get a handle on the operation.

"I'm not going to run before I walk," Cowan said. "I'll be spending the first couple of months developing a plan."

He thinks the track has a bright future, even with the current climate in the thoroughbred racing industry.

Wagering is down across the board and the industry is struggling in a gaming marketplace with increased competition from venues such as casinos.



Cowan takes reins. Rick Cowan is the new chief operating officer at Fort Erie Race Track. No stranger to Fort Erie, Cowan spent 18 years with the Ontario Jockey Club, the former owners of Fort Erie, from 1976 to 1994.

"We will turn the corner. To say that today is a very aggressive statement."

As for what plans he may have in store, Cowan was cautious.

"I have things in mind but I'll only act when I understand the landscape," Cowan said.

Cowan added that he is already being approached with ideas from employees at the track.

"Everybody here's been giving me ideas and that's great," Cowan said. "That's the beauty of this industry. Everybody helps out."

Sue Leslie, president of both the consortium and the Horsemen's Benevolent Protection Association, welcomed Cowan's appointment.

"Rick is a very experienced track operator. We're just thrilled to have him on board."