

Race Track management Team Introduced

Search for chief operating officer narrowed

By Richard Hutton, Staff - Apr 15, 2010 - 1:52 PM

A sign hanging on a wall in the clubhouse at Fort Erie Race Track Thursday morning told the story.

It was the track's new logo, the familiar script and stylized horse and jockey are still prominent but there was a new addition. "Under New Management" was stamped in red and the significance of that alteration was not lost on Jim Thibert.

The chief executive officer of the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium talked about a renewed vision for the venerable border oval in a news conference to introduce a new management team that will take care of the day-to-day operations of the 113-year-old facility.

"We trying to get the community back into the track,"

Thibert said afterwards. We want people in Fort Erie to know we have the largest tourist attraction in the area."

Thibert likened having the track in town to the steel mills in Hamilton.

"People in Hamilton, the drive by the steel plants every day," he said. "People who live in Toronto are used to all the sirens and noise. People here are used to driving by the track."

The key, Thibert said, will be getting those people to stop in.

"We'll be trying to get the community back into the track," he said. "It doesn't cost any money to come in and watch."



Race Track management team introduced. Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium chief executive officer Jim Thibert, second from right, introduced a new management team for the 113-year-old border track Thursday. With Thibert, from left, are, Tanya Grissell-Bailey, Security Manager; John Whitson, Racing Secretary; Sue Foster, Manager of Human Resources and Tom McKinnon.

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During the media conference, Thibert provided an update on preparations for Opening Day, May 1.

"We have obtained all of our licenses – and there are many," Thibert said as he rhymed off a virtual alphabet of acronyms, including the ORC (Ontario Racing Commission) AGCO (Alcohol and Gaming Corporation of Ontario) and the CPMA (Canadian Pari-Mutuel Agency). "We can now do all the things we have to do."

Thibert said a budget has been established for the track's operation for 2010. Help with that came by way of funding from the provincial government (\$6.1 million in 2010) but, as Thibert explained, it is just a start.

"This is a \$50-million business and we have to raise revenue," Thibert said. "We have nine different revenue streams right now and we have to find new ways to raise revenue."

Finding those new sources of revenue will be the task of the new management team, which includes a trio of new faces with some previous ties to Fort Erie Race Track mixed with personnel who were employed by the track under the ownership of Nordic Gaming. The new faces include:

- John Whiston, Racing Secretary
- Brian Jabelmann: Property Manager and Housekeeping
- Tom McKinnon: Manager of Wagering and Wagering Development

Whiston, Thibert said, has more than 30 years experience in the racing business including a previous stint at Fort Erie as racing secretary and time as Vice-president of Thoroughbred Racing for the Woodbine Entertainment Group.

Jabelmann is another 30-year veteran, including 18 years experience as a supervisor of track maintenance. He has worked at such venues as Harrah's Louisiana Downs in the United States, Mohawk Raceway in Campbellville, Ont., Woodbine Raceway in Toronto and Fort Erie (in the 1990s).

McKinnon has more that 40 years experience in racing and he, too, is in a second stint at Fort Erie. He has also been employed at Mohawk and Woodbine.

Nordic managers retained by the Consortia include:

- Alistair Gunn, Food and Beverage Manager/Executive Chef
- Sue Foster: Human Resources Manager
- Tanya Griselle-Bailey: Security Manager

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Gunn, after working in the food and beverage operations for the OLG Slots, became executive chef for the entire track operation. In 2006, he became Director of Food and Beverage.

Foster has been at the track for 12 years, serving in various capacities including Assistant to the General Manager, Office Administrator and Human Resources Manager.

Griselle-Bailey has spent the past decade in the track's security department, first as a supervisor and, as of 2007, as Head of Security.

The search is ongoing for a chief operating officer. There were several applicants from individuals and groups which was narrowed down to four. Requests for proposals have been issued and are due back Friday. Short-listed applicants are scheduled to be interviewed by Thursday, April 22 with selection and negotiations to be concluded by May 1.

Under the terms of a deal struck last December, Nordic would continue to operate the track until June 30. The Consortium officially takes over July 1 although the new management team is already on the job, Thibert said.

Three Nordic managers – CEO Bonnie Loubert, Director of Racing, Operations and Marketing Herb McGirr and Nordic representative Stephen Ayers will not be retained after July 1. McGirr had been offered a position on the new management team but Thibert said, but McGirr declined.

"He decided to move on with life changes of his own," Thibert said, referring to McGirr as a "gentleman". He said McGirr decided the time was right to make a "clean break."

Live racing returns to Fort Erie May 1 and the Prince of Wales Stakes, the second jewel in Canada's Triple Crown of Horse Racing, is scheduled for July 25.