

New owner, new hope at track

JOBS: Horse owners, trainers excited by possibilities to promote live racing

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As horse owners and trainers prepare for a 112th season at Fort Erie Race Track - a season some thought wouldn't arrive at all - they're already casting one eye to the future.

With new ownership preparing to take over the venue, they say suddenly there are more possibilities.

"We need to promote a lot more if this track is to have long-term success," said horse owner Richard Hurst, who spent Sunday morning at the Catherine Street facility getting stalls ready in the backstretch.

"There are a lot of people with a lot of good ideas, and it's important we listen and improve upon the entertainment options here."

The 2009 racing season, slated for 78 days, will run from May 2 to Oct. 27. Post time for the scheduled three-day weeks -Sunday, Monday and Tuesday -will be 1:05 p. m. as usual.

It once looked as though the track might not open for another season. But an 11th-hour deal struck between track owner Nordic Gaming and the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp. changed all that.

The EDTC, an agency of the Town of Fort Erie, is trying to buy the facility for \$35 million and set it up as a not-for-profit entity. The parties continue to negotiate terms of the sale, work out financing and develop a business plan.

During negotiations, there has been interest shown in creating a new entity called the Fort Erie Thoroughbred Race Track Corporation. It would be administered by a board of directors composed of representatives from the EDTC, the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, Town of Fort Erie, unions and possibly a provincial appointee.

Over the weekend, several horse owners and trainers at the track seemed to like the not-for-profit concept, which is how the Woodbine track in Toronto operates.

They feel such a model would allow people with a stake in live racing themselves to drum up unique ideas that would improve the product offered at the track.

"Night races would be a great idea," said Rich Walpole, a 54-year-old Fort Erie native who is part-owner of three horses. "I think it would create a new kind of interest in the community."

Hurst agrees, speculating if there's a strong enough desire to move in that direction, and if the idea proves successful, government might be willing to lend a hand.

"Maybe some of that (federal and provincial) infrastructure money that trickles down to Niagara can make its way here and be used for lighting at the track, and to upgrade the facility," said Hurst.

"I think night racing would help to a point. Maybe not every night, but it would increase the handle tremendously - people coming in and off-track betting."

Walpole, who grew up on Catherine Street, said he would like the track to bring back some of its old traditions.

"They used to have a zoo here when I was a kid. They also used to have a breakfast club, where you'd go and watch the horses get ready."

Hurst has several concepts he thinks would liven up the track: Racing on different days or a few nights, having more family events like the popular \$1 hot dog day, concerts, pony rides or occasional tours of the backstretch area so visitors can see how the horses are prepped for competition.

"I'd like to see an improvement in the spectator area," he said. "(Right now), the gamblers, the people who want to watch horse racing, have to watch it after the race is basically over. All the primary (grandstand) seating is after the wire."

He said there's not enough amenities that "really focus on the race track."

"Everything is geared towards the casino, and I know that's how it's all built but if you could focus a little bit more ... towards the actual product we're putting on, I think we'd see a positive reaction from the general public."

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Horse owner Rich Walpole

Trainer Paul Mandalfino said the racetrack should partner with more locally-based businesses as a way to promote local horse racing in the community.

He also said government tends to support not-for-profit corporations through grants, which could help the track in several areas. Once the track is owned by a not-for-profit agency, it could be eligible for a range of government grants.

"With a not-for-profit, the whole complexion of the situation changes with the government's attitude towards funds," he said.

"They're more apt to help somebody that's not-for-profit than they are somebody that's in it for a regular business. And if it's not-for-profit, then the books will reflect a better picture at the end of a few racing years.

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