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Cut-off Period for Imported Horses Shortened From 30 to 14 Days Ahead of Governor's Cup

Meeting discusses fairness in competition amid restart of territory racing

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The bulk of an emergency meeting called by the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Commission on Tuesday was spent discussing an email that had been received that morning by chair Hugo Hodge Jr. Signed by 17 people in the industry including owners and trainers, the correspondence articulated concerns about the upcoming race day.

Chief among them was a worry about which horses would qualify for the Governor's Cup, arguing that newly-imported horses would have an unfair advantage over those that have been in the territory, unraced, for an extended period of time.

“By past practice and custom, the Governor's Cup was restricted to horses which had competed in the Virgin Islands, or [were] in a territory for more than 30 days prior to the race, except if there were not enough horses entered to fill the gate,” the email said. Newly purchased horses were usually accommodated in a different race “to avoid unfairness and give horses and their owners already here the opportunity to compete in the Governor’s Cup,” the correspondence argued. Additionally, the email claimed that horses that have been in the territory for years are unable to be properly classified.

Mr. Hodge responded to the last point with some measure of amazement, saying that “all of us in this industry know” that the classification of horses is determined by the price that was paid, and how many wins that horse has had. “We have a classing system for the horses at the track that’s been in place,” he argued. “So I reject the concept that we can’t identify the horses as A, B, C, or D.”

Regarding the broader point about which horses were eligible for the Governor’s Cup, Mr. Hodge said that restricting entry to only horses that have been in the territory may mean running a race with “one, maybe two A class horses running against C and D cost horses. That’s not a fair match. It’s not a good match. It’s not what the public deserves to see,” Mr. Hodge declared, emphasizing the importance of giving patrons the best quality racing that is possible. While maintaining that he had “utmost respect for all of those owners that maintained horses throughout this time of uncertainty and stagnant practice,” Mr. Hodge, careful to note that he was only one of several board members, underscored that his focus was on providing the best racing experience to the public.

A second commissioner supported Mr. Hodge’s position. “Let’s move forward and get it done correctly,” said Sheldon Turnbull. He argued that the “extraordinary times” the territory was facing due to the restart in racing after a seven-year hiatus, necessitated flexibility as to how and when owners would be able to bring in race-ready horses. “You’re not just going to get a horse to have it for the race day, you’re going to get a horse that’s going to be sound, able to compete for a long time, and be a winner, whichever class it is.”

That process, he implied, would take some time. “We have practically started from zero,” Mr. Turnbull noted. Like Mr. Hodge before him, he praised those who have kept horses in the territory during the lull in racing activity. “Kudos to those who chose to keep horses on the track...training however they can and maintaining them however they can in this long absence of racing,” Mr. Turnbull said. However, he contended that the logistics of the situation required that the “past practice and custom” to which the email referred be amended to suit current circumstances.

Mr. Hodge noted that there were owners that had been trying to make the 30-day cutoff but “through conditions beyond their control,” deliveries would take place later this week, leaving them a few days shy of what was traditionally required. He also pointed out that the rules had not yet been changed to allow for the relaxation of the time requirement. “I guess people are clairvoyant and were able to raise a concern before it was done,” he quipped. However, Mr. Turnbull noted that he was the one who had articulated his intention to have the cut-off period adjusted, so perhaps those who wrote the email “just heard what I had said.”

A motion was passed to open up the floor for concerns, questions, and clarifications from those in attendance, and Clinton Hedrington, president of the St. Thomas/St. John Horsemen’s Association, stood in support of the proposal. “This association has no issue with what the Commission is doing moving forward,” he said. “We had no idea about this letter that was being sent.”

Mr. Turnbull then made the motion he had previously alluding to, seeking to amend the 30-day cutoff to 14 days, which was approved by those present.

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