

Former HRC Chair Responds to Criticism, Alleges Unchecked Doping Amid Horse Deaths

Responding to criticism from current commissioners, former Horse Racing Chair Jay Watson reiterates claims of inadequate oversight and doping, asserting that commission leadership contributes directly to recent horse injuries and fatalities.

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During its last meeting, members of the St. Thomas-St. John Horse Racing Commission gave short shrift to claims made by former Commission Chair Jay Watson that horse injuries and deaths on race days last year were the result of [unregulated doping and a lack of oversight](#). Now, Mr. Watson says that criticism by commissioners notwithstanding, pertinent questions remain about

how racing at the Clinton E. Phipps track is conducted.

While the general public awaits official findings from the investigation that followed the races on December 22, 2024, Mr. Watson believes that commissioners could be more forthcoming with information. “What specifically is meant by ‘horse condition?’” Mr. Watson asks, referring to what the HRC says was the underlying cause of the multiple injuries suffered by racing horses. “Pre-existing injuries, disease, malnutrition, not fit for racing, a combination of some or all of these factors?”

Mr. Watson pointed out the lack of a discussion on the possibility of doping contributing to the incidents. “Is this because doping is normalized in the Virgin Islands and the effects are obvious?”

While both the HRC and lawmakers have [advocated for the return of anti-doping legislation](#), suspended in 2023, Mr. Watson contends that the Commission itself has the power to decide not to sanction races that do not conform to anti-doping rules. “Suspending the anti-doping provision of the law did not suspend the Racing Commission's regulatory authority,” he argues. The decision to allow racing without anti-doping measures in place “is due to inept and feckless leadership of the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Commission and its members,” Mr. Watson declared.

He expressed his belief that the practice of drugging injured horses in order to race them is pervasive in the territory. An injury in a doped horse made to run then “progresses to catastrophic injuries, breakdowns and fatalities,” Mr. Watson argued. He blamed the prevalence of doping on the lack of skill and ability within the cohort of horse trainers in the territory. “Sound horses trained by competent people do not need to be doped,” he contended.

The former HRC chair also revisited one of his major concerns about the composition of the Commission that he had expressed before his ouster – the possibility that Commissioner Laura Palminteri is operating under a conflict of interest cloud. Having learned that she conducted an inspection of horses earlier this month, Mr. Watson asked, “how can a member of the racing commission be directly involved in providing any services for the horsemen...when they are charged with regulating horse racing?” This arrangement, he argues, is “clearly a conflict of interest.”

He urged other members of the Commission to declare whether they have “any interest in the horses,” or are “providing goods or services in any shape or form while regulating those same races.”

The current arrangement, Mr. Watson says, does not assist in garnering public confidence in the Commission's work. “Dr. Palminteri and possibly other members of the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing Commission are giving the appearance of worst-case scenario fraud and corruption, and in the best case scenario conflict of interest,” he says. “Either way, the optics aren't good.”

The rash of injuries and euthanization in last year's races show that “the horses on St. Thomas USVI are being raced under cruel conditions while they are being injured and dying,” Mr. Watson says. “The message from the St. Thomas/St. John Horse Racing commission is that they intend to continue this cruelty.”

In 2019, Mr. Watson was [ousted as chair of the Horse Racing Commission](#) via a motion introduced by Commissioner Sheldon Turnbull and seconded by Hugo Hodge, who now chairs the STT-STJ HRC. After his removal, Dr. Palminteri was reinstated as chair. During last week's meeting, it was Messrs. Turnbull and Hodge who made dismissive comments regarding Mr.

Watson's concerns.

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