



Building Saskatchewan

Harness racing in Saskatchewan is flourishing, and horsemen across the province are thrilled to see the sport re-inventing itself so successfully. The Yorkton Exhibition Association hosted 16 days of racing in 2008, and Saskatoon had eight (with their handles up 43% and 10%, respectively). To add to the mix, a group of horsemen and investors have jumped head-first into building a new track and training facility. And like anything, this substantial industry growth doesn't come without roadblocks. Lots of them. Licensing, purse money, race dates -- the list goes on. But with a little luck (and a little co-operation) it looks as though Saskatchewan racing just might come out on top.

**Story by Calvin Daniels
and Kim Fisher**

Photos by Glenn LeDrew

A new track has been a long time coming in Saskatchewan, and West Meadows, currently under construction on donated land, hopes to bring new stability to racing in the province. There's no doubt it's coming at a good time. There's been a recent surge in Saskatchewan harness racing, and though there are bound to be a few snags in the project, West Meadows is certainly creating a local buzz.

"We've had phone calls and received letters from people ecstatic about harness racing coming back to Regina," says project manager Glenn LeDrew. That support has even seen people stepping forward to buy shares in the track. Offered for \$1,000 a piece, only 50 shares will be available as the goal of the group is to remain a private corporation.

The track has received a \$50,000 interest-free grant from Saskatchewan Standardbred Horsemen's Association. It is the first time the organization has given such a loan to a track, says LeDrew, who sits as the SSHA president.

The idea for a new Regina track is one LeDrew says came about a few years ago. "It was really first talked about when Queensbury Downs (the previous Regina track) closed in 2002," he recalls.

The closure of this long-time home of standardbred racing in Saskatchewan left a major void in the industry. While a

number of participants simply pulled up stakes and headed to Alberta or other racing jurisdictions, LeDrew says many with careers and other ties in Regina were left without a place to race.

"Imagine the devastation when Queensbury closed," he shakes his head. "We didn't know what to do, and had no

without a place to race," LeDrew sighs.

Since then, the industry has stabilized and even grown. Standardbreds have returned to Saskatoon for eight days of racing each fall, and the Yorkton Exhibition Association has come on side. The YEA hosted six days of racing in 2006, and 16 days in both 2007 and 2008,

"Imagine the devastation when Queensbury closed. **We didn't know what to do, and had no place to go.**"

place to go." The only other track in the province had been out of standardbred racing for over a decade, so the SSHA was left scrambling.

"We contacted Yorkton, Melville, Weyburn – any place with a track – to try and find a place to have horse racing," says LeDrew. They finally located a group in Craven willing to hold a race card on a 5/8-mile track that hadn't been run in over 40 years. It gave standardbreds a place to go in 2003 and 2004, at least, but just before the 2005 race season, local organizers at Craven pulled out. "For the second time in three years we were left

showing substantial growth the past year, with the handle up some 45 per cent this season, says YEA manager Shawn Morin.

Even though the Saskatchewan industry has rebounded in the last couple of years, horse racing still relies on the whim of the exhibition track operators. So the half-decade of uncertainty led the SSHA to a new priority – to eliminate the potential for another industry collapse. "Our first priority became making sure we always have racing," says LeDrew.

"We want to build a track that's only purpose is harness racing," he says, adding that in order to build ownership



and attract needed new trainers and drivers, there has to be the impression there will always be a track to race at. "If people are going to believe in it again, it has to be a permanent facility."

So the idea for West Meadows Raceway became a focus for the group. They started out with a location already available, thanks to Bill McNally – a fan and horse-lover who passed away this summer. McNally had long said he would donate land near the city.

"Ever since Queensbury Downs closed," explains LeDrew, "he had said that if anybody got really serious about opening a track, he would make his land available to do that."

While the track and associated facilities are well under way, there are no guarantees just yet that the province will step forward to approve racing days for the track, or to fund race purses, says department spokesperson David Morris.

"It's our understanding that West Meadows is in the very early stages of development," Morris explains.

But West Meadows has applied to hold a six day race meet in 2009, which might mean some creative rescheduling to accommodate the regular Yorkton and Saskatoon meets. Morris refuses to speculate on where additional race dates

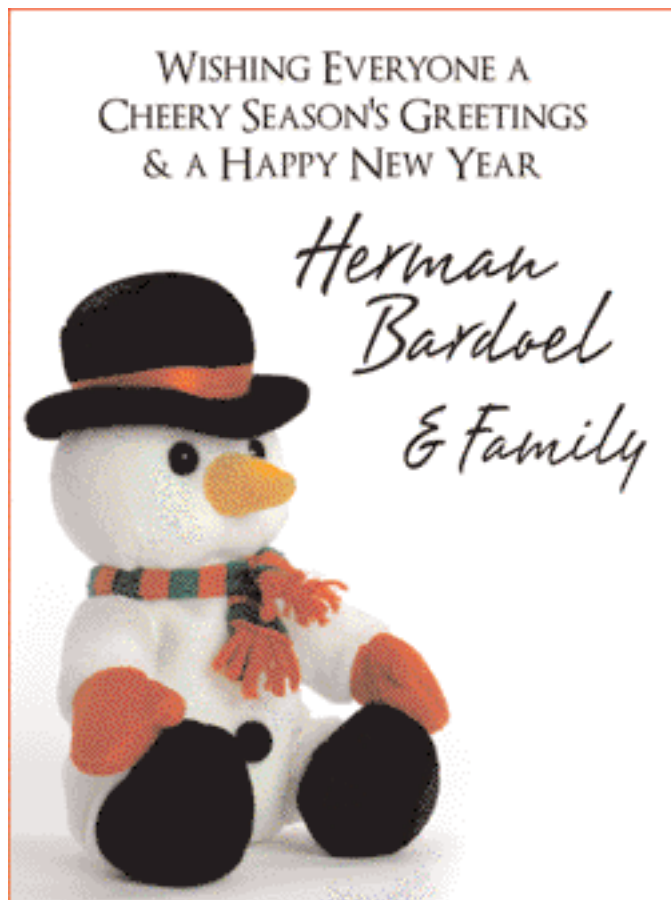
to sit down with the industry and talk about it." That said, the SLGA has the right to make that decision, even if Saskatoon and Yorkton continue to request the combined 24 days they have offered the last two years.

Aside from live racing, West Meadows would offer something else currently missing in Saskatchewan — a year-round training centre.

might come from – the department so far has not given any indication of expanding the current 24 days of standardbred racing held in Saskatchewan.

Might the SLGA borrow days from existing tracks to bring West Meadows into the mix? "That's difficult to say at this point," Morris responds. "We'd have

As it stands, adds Morris, the SLGA will support racing to the tune of \$1.5 million for the 2008/09 season. That breaks down to \$931,000 for 30 days of thoroughbred racing in Saskatoon, \$28,000 for two days of speed horse racing in Melville, \$150,000 for breeder facilities, and the remainder to



standardbreds. Saskatoon receives \$165,000 and Yorkton \$224,000.

LeDrew says they have had some talks with the SLGA that centered on generating a larger money pool for horse racing, and the new West Meadows track is not the only outlet with that request. Yorkton, for one, receives considerably less in race funding than Saskatoon. They work off just \$8,600 per day, while Saskatoon gets \$13,625.

Looking ahead to 2009, spokesperson for the Yorkton Exhibition Association, Dave Nussbaumer, says everyone involved in the industry seems to have a common goal – to find additional dollars to boost the purses for the owners and drivers. “We’ve already talked to Doug King (with SLGA),” he says. “We’ve told them we have some plans for next year. Hopefully there’s a bit more money.”

Nussbaumer adds that bigger purses are critical for a number of reasons, like attracting drivers to the four-month meet. But he’s positive the industry is moving in the right direction – that the provincial government understands the significance of increasing purses.

“We will have more money here next year,” he insists. “We have to. The cost of hauling horses and feeding horses is going up.

“Doug King was quite impressed with

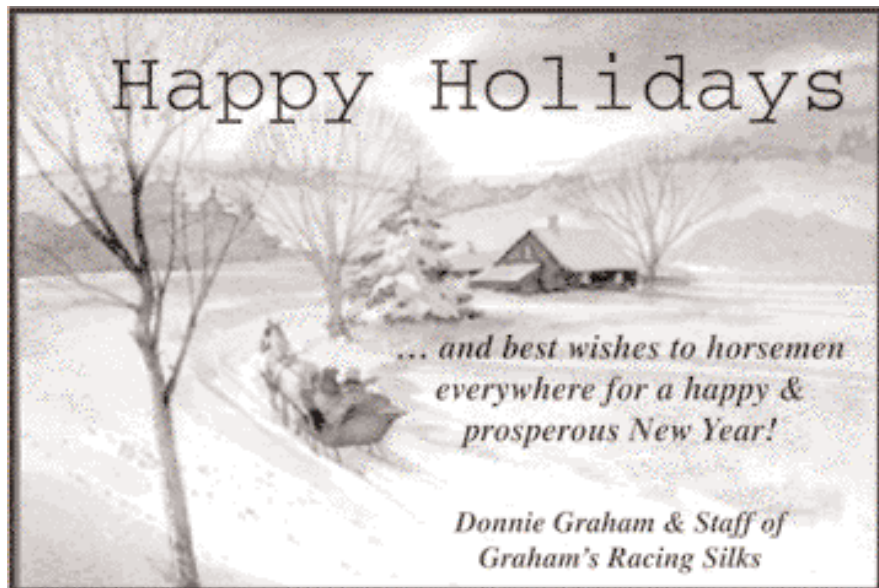
our numbers and impressed with our crowds,” Nussbaumer continues, “and that has to be sending a message to government about the potential to grow the industry. The government seems very supportive of everything we’ve suggested.”

Aside from live racing, West Meadows would offer something else currently missing in Saskatchewan – a year-round training centre. “Right now there’s no place for harness horses to train,” says LeDrew, making it difficult for owners and trainers in the province to have horses ready for qualifying days in May.

He is hopeful everything will come together to allow West Meadows to host live racing in partnership with Yorkton and Saskatoon, and he believes a track in Regina will add positive growth to the industry by bringing in more fans, owners, trainers and drivers.

After all, he stresses, having a place in Saskatchewan where racing is the only game – and the most important game – is absolutely essential for creating a prosperous industry. **■**

To comment on this story, send an email to feedback@trot.ca.



ALL THE BEST FOR THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

RAYMOND
SCHNITTKER