



Who's speaking for the Greyhound Code?

By Bruce Teague

Queensland GRA Chairman Phil Bennett is rightly happy with TAB commissions which “have exceeded budget forecasts” but things are not so bright further south, where both NSW and Victoria are struggling to find enough cash to maintain their tracks properly.

Both can expect the usual strong reactions from clubs denied funds for improvements and especially from any that are dropped from the lists.

Already the dogs are barking, so to speak.

This comes at a time when the racing industry in general is facing some sort of upheaval. Just what we can't be sure.

Certainly we can be positive about recent pay increases but the longer term is up for grabs.

Consider the unknowns:

The future ownership of all TABs.

The size of future betting pools.

The challenge to SKY Channel's monopoly.

An uncertain future for some clubs (even Albion Park).

A continuing decline in racing's share of the gambling market.

The disappearance of knowledgeable greyhound punters.

The rapid but jagged growth of PayTV.

The development of Internet betting.

Governments' and communities' attitude to online betting.

The most topical is the rush for positions in what has been a SKY racing monopoly, which is confusing the on-going TAB takeover battle.

Interactive TV Here

More than one in five Australian households now have PayTV.

Operators forecast that will double in the next five years as digital signals replace analog and more entertainment options become available.

Foxtel's new service, still at less than \$50 a month, will offer 150 choices, including viewer-generated goodies such as split screens, the option of selecting which actual match you want to see at Wimbledon or following an individual footballer around the field.

If you can get it, of course.

Personally, I find there's no cable in my area anyway and the body corporate will not run to a satellite dish because half the residents are renters, not owners. A set-top box is not much good in this part of the world either.

All of which further clouds the issue of SKY racing coverage - including SKY Home racing via the Foxtel system.

Layered on top of the takeover fight for NSW TAB Ltd, four fresh bidders are entering the competition for rights to broadcast Australian racing.

Starters include the Magic Millions duo of Gerry Harvey and John Singleton, Telstra and TenTen Digital, a British firm now doing much the same thing over there.

A couple of those proposals call for expanded discussion of upcoming thoroughbred races (to better inform punters), and imply less coverage of country horse meetings.

But the interesting thing is that in a huge range of media reports on these events none has mentioned

either harness or greyhound coverage.

Not a sausage.

The commentary has concentrated solely on the gallops, and, in particular, on the major Sydney and Melbourne clubs which control who-gets-what in practice.

The future of greyhound racing may well be decided in the boardrooms of the AJC and VRC.

Ironically, the trots and the dogs represent the only decent growth in TAB betting these days.

Turnover at the gallops has been flat for years and barely keeps up with inflation.

OK, perhaps it's unlikely to happen.

Money and the power of incumbent TABs will prevail in the end, leaving us with a slightly updated version of the status quo.

The TABs are well aware of the value of trots and dogs filling off-peak slots, particularly in the evening.

Even so, it's as well to remember that those TABs have already filled the screens to capacity and now badly need to find alternative ways of increasing their share of the gambling pie.

Does this mean two-channel racing broadcasts are in the offing? And, if so, how would the clubs and pubs handle that?

It would be no trouble for a multi-channel home PayTV customer but unworkable for a TAB outlet.

Viewing is one thing but obviously clubs and pubs couldn't handle simultaneous sounds. Either way, there are risks ahead for the smaller codes.

It's worth remembering that 20 or 30 years ago we had no pictures but half a dozen radio stations in each state broadcasting races. Even the ABC did it.

Now we have a SKY picture monopoly and only one radio outlet.

And in NSW even that station is owned by TAB Ltd. Can anybody guess what we will have 20 years from now?

Taken in total, it's a state of play which cries out for a strong and unified approach by greyhound industry managers.

Those unknowns listed above are themselves national or even international issues and tell us the need for an authoritative national greyhound body has never been greater.

ANYONE FOR TENNIS?

Tennis watchers would have marvelled at the recent advances from Hawkeye, the magic camera which stops action as the ball crosses the line and then paints a shadow on the screen where the ball made contact.

It leaves for dead the third umpire at the cricket or football.

So far, it's no more than entertainment value as tennis authorities have not put it to any practical use - not yet.

But it certainly outperforms the human line callers, who have been shown to make an appalling number of mistakes.

It also seems much more reliable than the cricket version which predicts the flight of the ball. I don't quite trust that one.

However, it brings up an old hobbyhorse of mine in that technology like this could be of enormous value to dog track designers.

Knowing exactly where and how interference is caused would be worth its weight in gold when laying out a turn, computing the banking angles and so on.

We need to carefully follow images of a large number of dogs to get a representative sample of cause and effect.

Hawkeye and its cousin Pineapplehead have more or less gone down this road for the gallopers and could easily do the same for greyhounds. That would be real progress.