

Press and Information Office

Speech by Mr. John Q'Donoghue, T.D. Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism at the World Greyhound Racing Federation International Conference in the Kingsley Hotel, Victoria Cross, Cork on Tuesday, 23rd September 2003 at 9.30am

I am delighted as Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism that the World Greyhound Racing Federation decided to hold this bi-annual Conference in Cork and I am particularly pleased to formally open your deliberations.

The WGRF was founded in Ireland in 1971 by the then Controlling Authorities of the Sport in Australia, Britain, Ireland, the USA and Spain. I understand that there are now twenty two countries world wide attached to the WGRF and I commend the efforts being made by your organisation, on a voluntary basis, in assisting persons and organisations in the establishment and development of greyhound racing in emerging Countries. Many of those countries' representatives are with us in Cork this week and I would like to welcome you, one and all, to Ireland.

I am pleased to see that the greyhound industry continues to grow internationally and now spans Europe, the United States, Australia and Asia. We can profit by looking at their experience in the greyhound industry, and I am sure that the delegates from many countries who are here today will each share their own experiences, to the benefit of the sector as a whole.

I note, from the your Conference agenda, that you will touch on a number of important issues affecting the greyhound industry. In particular, you will discuss the whole question of greyhound welfare.

Animal welfare is increasingly becoming a focus of concern to the general public. It is important that the sector be seen to focus on enhancing the structures in place for improving the overall welfare of the greyhound. I believe this is going to be a critical issue for the racing industry in the future. I welcome the interest of the WGRF in animal welfare and note the deep intent of the Governing Council.

We must always strive to breed the best greyhounds. More and more this is becoming a truly international activity facilitated to a much larger degree now by the introduction of breeding by artificial insemination. This is something which is most welcome provided it is properly managed and controlled. We have always had some international trade in

greyhounds with the US, Australia and many European countries but I suppose because of factors such as convenience, transport costs, veterinary controls etc most of the Irish dogs went to our nearest neighbour - the UK. The introduction of artificial insemination is capable of radically re-shaping the breeding scene here and around the world particularly at the top quality end. International groups with an interest in greyhound racing such as this Federation, should scrutinise this area and I'm sure you will have some lively discussions on the subject today. You already have largely common rules on Stud Book registrations in the International Alliance of Stud Books and it would make some sense now if you examine the possibility of having common rules on artificial insemination.

I also welcome your discussion of track surfaces and maintenance. It is imperative that we strive for better standardisation of regulatory and track maintenance systems. Focusing on this topic will help to ensure better and safer surfaces, essential for animal welfare and safe racing.

Since the introduction of greyhound racing into Ireland in 1927, we have seen the sport become an integral part of the lives of millions of people within the island. Over one million people attended greyhound racing last year. Many more are involved in raising greyhounds and the sport has become a very popular pastime for young urban people who are attracted by its excitement and glamour. The industry goes from strength to strength and it is expected that over 1.3 million patrons will attend Irish greyhound tracks in 2004.

A big part of the attraction of the sport here and abroad is the excitement for the ordinary punter in betting and the prospect of the win. However, in order to ensure that the betting market can safely grow and prosper we have to satisfy the public on the integrity of the racing. Therefore the effective management and control of the racing is critical. The industry has always been an important betting medium. However, in recent years there has been a shift in betting patterns in the sport. I now understand that, in the UK, 30% of bookmaker's turnover comes from greyhound racing. This is a large increase in a short time-span and again highlights the importance of the industry for the betting sector.

As well as our greyhounds going abroad more and more in recent years in particular greyhound breeders, owners and racing enthusiasts generally from Ireland have been visiting your great tracks in the US and Australia. They have been very impressed with many aspects of the sport in these other countries including the often different methods employed in the management and control of the racing. What I am suggesting here is that we are seeing the globalisation of greyhound racing. We may all individually feel that our businesses are well run but in an era of such change as is now taking place we must continuously examine and re-examine our systems and in that process we can be helped considerably by benefiting from each others experiences. That is why conferences such as this one can be so useful for sharing those experiences and greyhound racing world-wide is all the better for it.

In recent times there has been significant globalisation and technical advance in the industry. UK racing is now being transmitted into Sweden and Irish racing is being

beamed into the U.S. This is good for the industry. The impact of greater globalisation leads to higher aggregate pools, enhanced interest and excitement for punters. I am a firm believer that the whole sport and betting scene is heavily dependent on a good live show. For all elements of the greyhound industry to grow and remain relevant and dynamic into the future we must attract new people to the sport. Greyhound racing is our shop window. In Ireland we have taken some of the money generated through betting on the high street and very strategically and effectively ploughed it back into the development of ultra-modern facilities with tremendous results. Now I know that there are equally excellent facilities in the other major greyhound racing countries but there is always scope for further development. However, you should all, as a group, be planning the way forward for all aspects of this extremely exciting game so that the success you have now, can be built upon for the benefit of generations to come.

We in Ireland are particularly pleased that you will have an opportunity of witnessing at first hand, the progress that has been made in the development of our greyhound racing stadia and you will, of course, be appraised of the massive increases recorded in attendances and betting at the tracks where modern amenities have been provided. I wish you all well in your deliberations. Thank you.

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