

Light Harness – Tasmania

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Mr. Stuart Wright,
Secretary,
Legislative Council Sessional Committee Government Administration A,
Parliament of Tasmania,
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Inquiry into Tasracing Performance

The following submission is forwarded on behalf of Light Harness Tasmania. Our association has also participated in a joint submission with the Tasmanian Pacing Club and the New Norfolk Pacing Club.

If the opportunity arises for our association to meet with the committee, we would address both submissions at that time.

Light Harness Tasmania is an incorporated organisation that represents the interests of harness racing owners, trainers, drivers and breeders, primarily in southern Tasmania. Our association has and does also provide input and recommendations on state-wide issues and industry policy.

Light Harness Tasmania is also a racing industry association as defined in Part 3, Section 10 of the Racing (Miscellaneous) Regulations 2004 Act which describes Light Harness Tasmania as a prescribed body.

Light Harness Tasmania has serious concerns in relation to the faulty construction of the Tattersalls Park racecourse. These concerns relate to the maintenance of the track, the camber of the track and in particular the bend into the home straight.

Tasracing in its role of being responsible for the asset maintenance has not provided the racing surface that was promised to the industry. These promises played a major role in convincing industry participants to transfer from the Showgrounds to Tattersalls Park.

This also applies to the construction of the stabling area. In the enclosed area there is not sufficient room for the clear passage of horses and in the open area it is exposed to weather conditions and the ground surface is prone to becoming a muddy slush when there is rain.

Tasracing appear to be incapable of correcting these problems. This is particularly galling when our association has been given to understand that \$5,000,000.00 was transferred for this purpose to Tasracing from Tote Tasmania, at the time of their separation of functions. This was obviously not spent on its intended purpose.

With the proposed redevelopment of the Tattersalls Park thoroughbred racecourse; this would be an ideal opportunity for Tasracing to finally deliver on their promises to the industry.

The issue of the distribution of stake money from the Racing Funding Deed is of great concern to Light Harness Tasmania. Our association members attended seminars conducted by Tote Tasmania to accept or otherwise the separation of Tote Tasmania from its industry management role and the creation of Tasracing.

At those seminars we were guaranteed that to quote the CEO, Tasracing "no-one will be any worse off financially under Tasracing". However, in recent months Tasracing has seen fit to alter the funding formula for each racing code and reduce the amount of funding available to the harness racing industry. When asked how this could be so, Tasracing have responded by stating that the Racing Funding Deed gives them the legislative authority to do so. This may be so, but the spirit of the legislation and the manner in which it was originally communicated to the industry does no such thing.

The CEO of Tasracing stated at a recent meeting between the industry, Tasracing and the Minister for Racing that he did state that "no-one will be any worse off financially under Tasracing", however, he went to say that subsequently someone changed the legislation to allow a much wider interpretation which was then enacted and he was unaware of that at the time.

Our association finds this surprising because he was the Chief Executive Officer of Tasracing at the time the Racing Funding Deed was signed of behalf of Tasracing by its chairman and its company secretary.

This highlights the issue our association has with Tasracing, in that we are provided with information with which to make an informed decision and we do so, only to be subsequently informed that the underlying information has changed or no longer applies, but the original decision will stand.

Tasracing has continually promoted its role in the sale of racing product overseas. This is supposed to create greater benefits and opportunities for all sectors of the racing industry. However, to date nothing has been forthcoming and as far as can be ascertained nothing of a firm nature in the way of the sale of racing product is forthcoming.

The constant refrain is that Tasracing is a fledgling organisation and we have to wait for these returns to the industry. It must be remembered that Tasracing was established in 2008 and took over the governance and administration of the industry on 1 January, 2009. It is reasonable to believe that some appreciable progress should have been made in two and a half years.

There will come a time when the industry will ask the question if it is better for the industry for Tasracing to be abolished and the millions of dollars it costs to operate to be returned to the industry to increase the stake money which is not forthcoming from the lack of sales of racing product, overseas.

Serious consideration should be given to deciding what form the industry should take, particularly if the Tasracing model fails. If revenue cannot be increased or sustained then expenditure must be reduced.

The issue that flows on from this is the placement of harness racing on Sunday night. It is becoming apparent that participants, particularly those who are hobbyists are becoming disenchanted with racing at the “death knock” of the week. Given that hobbyist provide over 75% of horses that are racing; it is important to maintain their involvement in the industry.

One scenario may be a return to racing on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon without Sky Channel coverage. If as it is reported that the whole Tasmanian racing industry provides less than 5% of the turnover of Tote Tasmania, perhaps this should be costed and considered. It must also be remembered that video and audio broadcast technology is rapidly advancing and Sky Channel could become redundant in the future.

Light Harness Tasmania is of the firm belief that the functions of Racing Services Tasmania and Tasracing should remain separate. It is essential to assure the punting public and the harness racing industry that the operation of the stewards panel and field selection is entirely independent and publicly seen to be so.

This is so particularly so given that the harness racing member on the Board is probably the largest owner within the harness racing industry. This is further reinforced by the Chairman of the Board participating in ownership with the harness racing member. As well the greyhound racing board member is working as the Hobart Greyhound Racing Club veterinarian surgeon and sponsoring greyhound races.

The situation of board members having potential control of Racing Services Tasmania’s current functions; albeit at arm’s length could create an adverse perception in the public’s mind and can easily be avoided by the status quo remaining.

Light Harness Tasmania has found the management and consultation of Tasracing to be somewhat autocratic, at times. This is perhaps best illustrated by the example of the creation of the now defunct Harness Reference Group.

Light Harness Tasmania was informed that the Breeders, Owners and Trainers Association would represent it on the Harness Reference Group. This was done without any consultation, whatsoever and when asked how this decision was reached; the blunt answer was “the Board has made the decision.”

Whilst Light Harness Tasmania has liaised with the Breeders, Owners and Trainers Association and continues to do so; it believed it should be able to present its views, independently of them. To date, Light Harness Tasmania has not received an explanation of the process after many requests for one.

I hope these comments are of assistance to the Inquiry.

Phillip A. Young
President,
Light Harness Tasmania.

1 June, 2011.