

MEETING KERRY-RUPERT TEST

The Good Oil

With **BRUCE
TEAGUE**



We now have a fair idea of where the TABs are heading (see last issue) but what about the greyhound code? Does it need to re-invent itself?

Greyhound authorities all over Australia have come up with major reviews or fresh strategic plans in the past 10 years, some of them two or three times. Yet the resultant changes have usually been minor and now they're all either short of cash or worried about future income. Searching for reasons for that situation prompts you to ask more about a range of recent events. For example ...

* Why did it take three years to introduce the green rug across the country, and then in fits and starts?

* Why, on three separate occasions, has NSW drawn up a track rationalisation plan and each time walked away from it?

* If all States adopt breeders incentive programs favouring local sires (three have them now), will anyone benefit in the end - and what will it cost owners?

Horses are not immune from the squeeze either. In a recent speech (as reported by the Sydney Morning Herald), AJC Chairman Dr Treve Williams pointed out thoroughbred "administration costs in all states have increased dramatically and government intervention has not produced better leadership".

Answers to the three questions involve many factors. But one thread running through all of them is politics, meaning politics in the general sense, not just what Governments do. Nothing improper or illegal but political influence nevertheless.

On top of that, the tendency in all forms of racing has been to concentrate on neat and hassle-free administration rather than to create innovative, forward-thinking programs. No-one has ever put that more succinctly than that prominent racing man, Brian Beattie, retiring

CEO of the Victoria Racing Club. Four years ago he declared:

"Racing is very well run. It's 100 years behind the times but it's very well run".

Now there's a conundrum.

How can you break away from politics and bureaucracies in a non-profit club environment, where everyone either gets elected by their peers or is appointed by whatever Government is in power?

How can you deal with billion-dollar TAB companies working for their shareholders when you are a collection of willing volunteers trying to do your best for your mates, and when you might be out of a job after the next election? The answer, of course, is that it's pretty well impossible.

This is why the racing codes are no better off than they were 10 years ago. It's why TABs now control racing. It's why personality hassles occur and good men repeatedly disappear from the scene.

The obvious conclusion is that the "system" is not competitive. The concept of amateur committees running clubs, representative boards running States and noone running the country is showing the strain.

The Balance Sheet

This is very frustrating when you consider that greyhound racing can boast of highly skilled trainers, the world's best racing greyhounds, top quality breeding stock, the best vets, state-of-the-art feed and medicines and a successful drug elimination program. Technically, it's also easy and fairly cheap to present to distant viewers.

All these are terrific assets for an industry.

But it has liabilities, too.

They include tracks with dubious designs, obsolete data systems, a massive decline in genuine customers, an absence of worthwhile marketing campaigns and a mistaken public view that the greyhound is nastier than the pit

bull terrier.

Today's challenge is to overcome those liabilities and make better use of our very worthwhile assets.

To do that the industry has no choice but to think beyond next week's meeting or merely policing rules and regulations.

Instead, it must increase the effort put into critical targets such as:

- * The promotion of the greyhound breed.
- * The achievement of profitability targets and wealth creation.
- * The development of attractive, busy, multi-purpose venues.

Among other things, this involves taking greyhound racing to the people rather than waiting for them to turn up.

But do we have the structures in place to bring it all about? The evidence of the past 10 years suggests not. Lots of good people around but what they do and how they do it are not achieving the desired results.

At State or national level decisionmaking is often slow because of the nature of the organisations (to say nothing about convoluted procedures built into Government-created quangos).

Committees are always doubtful performers when it comes to making timely or hard decisions. A contributing factor is that - in some States - board members have to satisfy both their political masters and the members of their particular industry sector.

It's all too hard, according to Mike Ahern, who recently quit the GRNSW board mainly because he found it "weighted to serve factional interests to the detriment of the common good".

At the club level the situation is even trickier. Many would not have survived were it not for the time put in by volunteers, particularly those on the committee. Yet, by definition, that indicates they don't have the resources to mount marketing campaigns or to bring tracks and public facilities up to top standard.

For smaller country clubs, that's not likely to change much. Still, they perform a valuable function, sometimes as racing nurseries but always in spreading the word and encouraging local betting markets to flourish.

Pressure on TAB clubs For the bigger TAB clubs, life is much more demanding.

Their services are on display all over the

country, and sometimes internationally, and they must shape up if the industry at large is to prosper.

It's here that we need to apply the Kerry-Rupert test. What are some of the things Packer and Murdoch would do if they made a successful takeover bid for the greyhound industry?

Certainly, they would chop out unnecessary duplication, ignoring State borders on the way. Adjacent clubs would be combined under a single administrative unit.

One phone number, one office, one manager, one ad in the local papers. (Moving Beenleigh's activity to the Gold Coast and putting Bendigo and Shepparton under one manager are evidence of progress in this area).

Each larger unit would be re-organised under a board that did nothing but look after major policy issues and a manager who made all the operating decisions and performed well or got sacked.

Kerry-Rupert would quickly see that a weekly greyhound meeting is not enough to generate a decent return and would insist on diversification. Clubs that failed to produce profits from non-racing activity would have a big question mark over them.

Yet these sorts of remedies often seem beyond the reach of existing systems. So the way to racing prosperity lies in creating systems which would encourage them to happen.

Systems which would also develop a single set of racing rules, a single set of grading policies, a single national form database and a single national controlling body - with real power - which would better negotiate for the industry and which would handle technical stuff like track design, breeding rules, rug colours and the like.

In some ways, cricket is not a bad example. It has strong State supervision in certain areas yet Cricket Australia sets the rules and conducts the big negotiations with sponsors and TV networks. And, although it's a battle sometimes, it tries to keep away from politics.

Ponder the thought that if we don't go down this road, one day Kerry or Rupert might.

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