

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREYHOUND RACING IN VIETNAM

Papers by Mr. Nguyen Ngoc My, General Director, Sports and Entertainment Services and Mr. Phil Bell, Project Consultant

INTRODUCTION

The cutting of the ceremonial ribbon on Sunday May 6th 2000 to signal the official introduction of Greyhound Racing in Vietnam was the culmination of a dream which began twenty-five years ago.

Arriving in Australia as a refugee in 1976 my family endured hardships like anyone else in trying to establish a new life in a new country without the basis of financial backing. Those early times were difficult but through self-determination and a strong work ethic we survived. Over the next twenty years or so during which we were fortunate to be able to develop a healthy construction business the sport of greyhound racing also became a way of life.

As a regular at many of the NSW South Coast tracks as well as Wentworth Park the passion for the sport grew to the extent that eventually I became an owner and was associated with some of the sports top trainers during that time.

My success as an owner was limited but still the passion remained. It was also during those days that a friendship formed with South Coast based greyhound breeders Jim and Betty Drysdale. Jim would later join the project in Vietnam in 1999.

Like most owners I developed what I considered to be a deep and through understanding of all matters related to greyhound racing, knowledge that would be later tested as the Vietnam project evolved.

During the early 1990's, following the successful establishment of a construction company to improve ties between Australia and Vietnam (VABIS – Vietnam Australia Building Industry Services) the idea developed of introducing greyhound racing to Vietnam.

The concept was pursued through various avenues and discussions with a number of people both in Australia and Vietnam. But the breakthrough really occurred in 1993 when significant members of the Ba Ria Vung Tau Peoples Committee displayed sufficient interest in the concept to allow a formal application process to begin.

The licensing process would take another six years.

The introduction of a sport with associated gambling or betting was never going to be easy, particularly to a Communist country. The licensing process required careful consideration by many many people and Committees, all of whom required an understanding of the sport, the objectives of the company and the benefits to Vietnam (as a minimum) before forming their conclusions. That process was time consuming, necessarily very slow, and deliberate to ensure that all concerned parties were understanding of the issues and the potential outcomes from what was being proposed.

A 25year license was granted to Sports and Entertainment Services Ltd to operate greyhound racing (and also go-kart racing and moto crosse) in 1999. The license included the rights to conduct totalisator betting on greyhound racing.

The license was ratified by the Central Government that same year.

VIETNAM – THE OPPORTUNITY

Vietnam is a country of almost 80 million people. It is an emerging market, centrally planned and governed with the government retaining ownership and/or control of productive facilities. The government since 1989 has embraced a policy of encouraging foreign investment and development, but the real impact of that policy has only had an effect on the lifestyles of the local people over the last 4-5 years.

Most Vietnamese, due to the country's turbulent history and also the country's backward Banking system prefer to retain their savings in cash. They do not put their money in the bank or any government or joint venture investment network currently available in the country.

Most of the disposable income (savings) is spent on improving lifestyle. That includes engaging in entertainment activities such as ten-pin bowling, water fun parks, cinemas and go-kart racing. But adult entertainment is extremely limited in Vietnam. It presently is represented in the form of bars, discos and karaokes. Gambling is not officially permitted by the government, although on-course betting (limited) is permitted at horse (pony) racing and now greyhound racing.

Only one Casino investment license has been granted by the government. The license restricts the business to foreign passport holders only.

On-course betting is available in Vietnam in the form of EXACTA betting at the Pony Racing Club in Ho Chi Minh City. The Pony Club is government owned and managed. The betting system is manual (pre-numbered tickets) and therefore considered tedious and boring for those serious about betting. Moreover the Pony Club facilities are in urgent need of upgrade or complete renovation

In summary, the local Vietnamese have very few opportunities for leisure related activities. They are gamblers by nature and the advent of an additional entertainment facility that also accommodates expanded forms of wagering represented a real business opportunity in Vietnam.

THE JOINT VENTURE

The Ba Ria Vung Tau Peoples Committee, through its tourist organization, (Ba Ria Vung Tau Tourist Corporation Ltd) was the Province to first embrace the ideal of introducing greyhound racing as an entertainment form to increase tourism.

The Ba Ria Vung Tau Tourist Corporation was among the most progressive tourist organizations in Vietnam. With Vung Tau being the most accessible seaside resort from Ho Chi Minh City, it is flooded with tourists (particularly on weekends) many venturing from nearby provinces to take in the relaxed atmosphere and beach activities available in Vung Tau

The Ba Ria Vung Tau Tourist Corporation has been responsible for major redevelopment of the BACK BEACH area in Vung Tau, raising the facilities in that region to international standards. Water sports dominate the redevelopment, but other entertainment opportunities such as many bars, karaokes, mini golf, go-karts, tourist walks also form part of the total entertainment package in Vung Tau.

The Ba Ria Vung Tau Tourist Corporation recognized the potential of greyhound racing as a tourist attraction (and additional entertainment form for the local people) and was quick to provide support to the project.

The Ba Ria Vung Tau Tourist Corporation formed a 30/70 joint venture with Hemlock Services Ltd (foreign investment partner) registered as SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT SERVICES LTD to progress the project.

The local partner's contribution was a parcel of land in Vung Tau (Old Football Stadium).

THE FACILITIES

THE STADIUM

Grandstand

Lam Son Stadium in Vung Tau was a former Soccer Stadium. Although in urgent need of renovation the Stadium was ideally located, close to major hotels and ferry transportation services. The Stadium was also easily accessible for the local people.

Original plans were to renovate the Stadium Grandstand and Soccer Field, incorporating the greyhound track on the outer perimeter of the playing field.

But within a short period it was recognized that the Grandstand needed to be demolished and totally rebuilt.

The Lam Son Stadium today is a far cry from the Stadium of the past. The next slides show the transition from old to new. The Grandstand area has three levels (a) Ground Floor (basement), (b) 1st Floor (outdoor undercover seating), and (c) 2nd Floor (VIP AREA).

An AWA Atlas Totalizator Computer system is also installed at the Stadium. A total of 38 betting terminals are strategically located throughout the complex.

Grandstand capacity is approximately 3000, which was surely tested on opening night of May 6th 2000

The total Stadium capacity (inclusive of outer public areas) is approximately 5-6000.

SES employs around 150 casual and permanent staff in the conduct of its business.

Track

Track design was constrained by the available area at Lam Son Stadium.

As such a tight two-turn circuit of 396M circumference was developed.

Three race distances are available 260M, 450M, and 630M.

The track-racing surface is sand. Samples of various NSW sand (loam) tracks were obtained for the project and the sand locally produced in Vietnam to meet specifications.

All of the sand was laid by hand.

Lure equipment was supplied from Australia, while the starting boxes were acquired from the Bulli Club in NSW.

Track lighting was supplied locally to Australian track specifications.

Kennels

Accommodation for ten races of eight greyhounds is provided at the Stadium.

The kennels are air-conditioned and also incorporate vet facilities, wash down area, and weighting and identification areas.

The greyhound kennels were designed on NSW provincial standards.

Soccer Field

An international standard Soccer field was developed as part of the project.

The grass playing area was seeded by hand and is currently maintained by two grasskeepers.

An Australian (Fosters) Team played Vietnam at the Stadium on Jan 16th 2000. Exhibition greyhound races were also conducted on that day.

Local soccer teams from Ba Ria Vung Tau region utilize the facility on weekdays and also Saturday mornings for various competitions.

Power

A 500 kva Back up Generator is included in Stadium facilities. The back-up generator is diesel powered and starts automatically (within 30secs) of a mains power failure. The back-up generator has sufficient capacity to operate all facilities at the Stadium.

Subsequent to greyhound racing being officially opened in May the Back-up generator has operated for the full duration at two race meetings without any undue interruption to the respective meetings.

THE RACE MEETINGS

Greyhound racing commenced on 6th May 2000 (Sunday) with an eight race program. All races were eight dog fields over 450M.

Race Meetings occurred once per week (Saturday) following the opening. The first race was initially scheduled for 7pm but after several weeks moved to 7.15pm to accommodate travelers from HCMC.

Distance races (630M) were introduced during mid July. One distance race was programmed each week.

Flying races (260M) were introduced in conjunction with the move to two race meetings per week (Wednesday and Saturday) from 16th August 2000. Between three (3) and four (4) Flying stakes were programmed on a Wednesday with two (2) Flying Stakes on a Saturday. Race fields varied from 6 to 8 greyhounds depending on nominations for the meetings.

The arrival of additional greyhounds throughout August and September removed the necessity for Flying races.

Twelve races were conducted from September at Saturday meetings.

Betting turnover increased almost exponentially during the formative period. In less than 8 weeks turnover grew by more than 100% compared to the opening meeting which attracted a crowd estimated in excess of 6000 people.

Average attendance at Saturday race meetings is around 3500- 4000 people.

It was indeed an honour to have the World Greyhound Racing Federation represented at the official opening in Vietnam.

THE BETTING

Three bet forms were initially offered:

***WIN,
EXACTA &
TRIFECTA.***

The system requires patrons to complete a BettingCoupon to place a bet.

PLACE betting was included from 16th August 2000 .

THE BA RIA GREYHOUND TRAINING & KENNEL COMPLEX.

The Ba Ria Complex is located some 30 minutes from Vung Tau in an idyllic setting on 10 hectares.

Unlike other operations where greyhounds are retained and housed in close proximity to the track the Ba Ria Complex was designed to allow the imported greyhounds sufficient space to freely move about apart from providing training facilities remote from the track.

The facilities were constructed in just under 14 months. Work was delayed during the traditional wet season period. PICS

The facilities are of international standard.

A number of local villagers were compensated and relocated in the development of the Ba Ria Complex.

Local residents were given priority consideration for employment at the Complex.

THE COMPLEX

The original design for the complex included a 500M two turn training track, 300M straight track, Kennel facilities for 240 greyhounds, veterinary hospital and clinic, and kitchen, storage and administration facilities.

The 500M training track was later considered unnecessary and deleted from the project.

Kennels

Six (6) kennel blocks each holding 38 greyhounds are situated at the Northern end of the Complex.

Each greyhound is kenneled individually with a separate outdoor yard off the kennel block for each kennel. The outdoor yards were originally 4M long and grassed but were later shortened and a concrete base provided to overcome parasite problems.

Each greyhound is provided with a hammock style bed. These were manufactured in Vietnam from Australian designs.

Water bowls are suspended 1M from the floor to overcome wastage. Filtered drinking water is purchased daily for the greyhounds.

Isolation Kennels

Three (3) isolation blocks are located adjacent to the Veterinary Clinic. Each isolation block contains eight (8) kennels identical in size and construction to those provided in the kennel blocks, but without the outdoor access yards.

These are used for quarantine purposes, and also for sick and /or injured greyhounds.

Veterinary Facility

The Veterinary Hospital and Clinic was designed by Consultant Veterinarian, Dr John Newell.

The original design had the future in mind. Apart from treating greyhounds owned by the company it also provided a full Veterinary Clinic designed to accommodate public ownership of greyhounds. The veterinary clinic and hospital was to international standards. It included x-ray facilities, separate Operating Theater, as well as various storage and administration areas.

The design has been changed in more recent times to accommodate administrative demands of the complex, but the original veterinary facilities remain unchanged.

Kitchen & Storage Areas

The main kitchen and storage area accommodates freezing rooms for 16 tonne of imported kangaroo meat and cool rooms for 12 tonne of dry food and vegetables. A separate thawing room is also provided in the kitchen.

Training Areas.

Outdoor training yards 100M in length and a 300M straight track are provided.

Swimming Pool

A 25M exercise pool for greyhounds is also included in the Complex.

ADMNISTRATION

The majority of staff at Ba Ria are local Vietnamese.

21 kennel attendants were originally trained to care for the initial shipments of greyhounds. That number has recently increased to 30 kennel attendants with greyhound numbers now surpassing 200 at Ba Ria.

Kennel attendants are rostered to ensure coverage seven days per week.

Kitchen, Maintenance, Security, Administration and Management are included in the total 50 people employed at the Complex.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS

Future Tracks

SES plans to develop a network of seven greyhound tracks throughout Vietnam. Other locations planned are:-

*Ho Chi Minh City
Hanoi
Hai Phong
Da Nang
Nha Trang
Can Tho*

Ownership Program

SES plans to introduce public ownership of greyhounds within the next twelve months. The greyhounds will be retained at Ba Ria and trained by company employed trainers. The owners will receive prizemoney. A monthly training fee will be levied.

Breeding Program

Following a successful trial program earlier this year whereby fourteen (14) pups were whelped to four (4) bitches in Vietnam, SES will formally introduce a breeding program at Ba Ria.

The breeding program is intended to supplement the need to import racing greyhounds and is expected to be fully effective within two years.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of greyhound racing to Vietnam on May 6th, 2000 was an extremely proud moment for my family and myself. It was simply a dream come true.

Since that time I am pleased to report that the local Vietnamese have embraced greyhound racing with similar passion to that of other countries which host the sport. It is therefore timely to move on and continue to develop a network of greyhound tracks throughout Vietnam. This will provide the sport the necessary infrastructure required to be sustainable in the longer term. And it will also provide opportunity for everyone in Vietnam to witness the thrill and spectacle of this wonderful sport of greyhound racing.

Footnote:

INDO CHINA RACING AND ENTERTAINMENT (Mr Nguyen Ngoc My, Chairman) has been granted a 30 year license for the development of greyhound racing in CAMBODIA .

A racing facility has already been identified in Phomn Phenn.