

A NEW ERA BEGINS

The Good Oil

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JULY 2004 must go down as a turning point in Australian greyhound racing.

For the first time in recent memory, early interference has been reduced due to a fundamental change in a track design feature.

Greyhounds South Australia has installed extra-wide “Steriline” boxes for all three distances at Angle Park.

South Australian company Steriline Racing is also a major builder of horse racing gates and exports to Asia and the Middle East.

The boxes measure 4.05m across, compared with the 3.30m version they replaced.

They are also angled in slightly so that all runners will theoretically cover the same distance. The extra width means greater separation between runners at the jump.

Do they work?

Well, early observations say you bet they do.

Almost without exception, dogs are running freely to and around the first turn. In 515m races not only are the dogs not bumping but they also seem to have enough room to each take their chosen route through the field.

The new boxes will be installed later at Gawler. GSA went to some trouble three years ago when they last re-ramped the Adelaide circuit, making adjustments to the first turn and box positioning after consulting a range of skilled advisors, including an American vet-cum-greyhound researcher.

The latest advance underlines GSA’s position as a leader in racing technology.

Angle Park is still a tight track and strongly favours good railers, but now it promises to give all runners a much better chance at the chocolates.

The move to wider-spaced boxes is such a simple device that you wonder why it has not been done before.

Victoria made some small changes to its standard some time back but to nothing like the Adelaide degree.

Even then Victorian boxes prove something of a risk

for first-up visitors because their higher apertures encourage the dogs to stand taller rather than crouch down.

Wentworth Park improved its lot when it got rid of the old double-acting “Bailey” boxes.

The new ones have a conventional opening and a floor with a slight downward slant. They brought about a first sectional reduction of more than one tenth of a second.

Standardisation

The Angle Park change reminds us of two things.

First, nothing confuses dogs more than boxes with different characteristics. The more we can

standardise the product the better the races will be.

Second, if a relatively simple change like this can radically improve the reliability of greyhound racing what else is there that we haven’t done yet?

For one, all those dreadful smash-and-grab bend starts are candidates for review.

There has to be a better way to set up middle distance racing so that all runners get a fair crack at the prize.

Turn radii and banking angles vary from track to track and even from one distance to another.

Which is best?

How do you make that judgement? It’s easy to see what doesn’t work but harder to be sure about the ideal figure.

I mentioned last month that several sports data analysis firms would be in a position to study greyhound races with the aim of working out exactly what design features are good or bad. South Australia has now demonstrated the potential benefits of going down that road.

FAIR EXCHANGE

TAB and thoroughbred spokesmen have gone quite hysterical after the Feds refused to outlaw Internet betting exchanges.

“All the racing industry” has agreed they should be banned, UNiTAB CEO Dick McIlwain told The Courier-Mail (which itself seems to be supporting that view for some unknown reason).

Apparently McIlwain doesn’t see the industry’s

customers and most racing writers as part of that industry. Neither of those groups is voting his way. Now UNiTAB is threatening to start up its own betting exchange to compete with Betfair. Go for it, Dick!

That's the very point we have been making all along. Mind you, the TABs will need to be on the ball now that big Kerry is going halves with Betfair.

The Packers are not only among Australia's biggest businessmen but Kerry is also the country's biggest punter. Obviously he knows the racing game.

It had to happen some time, as I suggested just last month. This could be the start of the end of cosy monopolies and the start of a new era for race clubs. However, the proposed 50/50 venture between Packer's PBL and Betfair still has one hurdle to jump.

State Racing Ministers and the big thoroughbred clubs have dug in their heels and, so far, have rebuffed attempts by Betfair to gain a license to bet "legally". That would be a desirable step in order to regularise commission paid to race clubs.

State Governments are presumably motivated in two ways.

First, TABs and the racing establishment, both of whom want to maintain their entrenched positions, are lobbying them hard.

The TABs hate competition and the big race clubs like to have direct control over who bets where. Galloping clubs have always been a powerful political lobby.

This opposition flies in the face of customer demand. An important minority of punters clearly see Betfair's service as a desirable alternative to the expensive TAB product line.

To ignore their needs is both dangerous and unnecessary.

Second, wagering and gambling taxes make up 10% to 15% of State revenue and Treasurers are worried about a possible diversion of funds if the growth of betting exchanges continues.

The concern is not justified. On every occasion in the last 40 years, an improvement in betting services has been followed by a growth in turnover.

The TABs themselves have proved that.

That principle applies not just in racing but in any walk of life.

As for the claimed threat to racing integrity, this is nothing more than cunningly worded propaganda from vested interests.

It has no basis in fact, as evidenced by the recent view of the UK controlling authority, The Jockey Club, that "the incidence of irregular betting patterns reported to The Jockey Club has declined over the past few months".

Information supplied by Betfair has proved to be a major factor in helping to weed out UK racing's undesirables.

Finally, in what looks like a last-ditch attempt to chop out intruders, the gallops are furiously investigating how to attach a copyright to their field lists - i.e. to make them available only to approved users.

We don't know the legal answer to that question yet but the subject is becoming more and more irrelevant.

Betfair has already shown it means nothing in the Internet age.

Or to quote computer expert and writer Graeme Philipson from the Sydney Morning Herald, "Copyright is an old idea based on an old technology. It has the same future as typewriters, LP records, leaded petrol and telegrams".

It's time to move ahead.

LEARNING FROM THE BANKS?

With the Internet temporarily down I had cause to phone the TAB in NSW for scratchings recently.

This happened just as TABCORP was busy changing the locks on the front door, but it turns out that the NSW system had just updated anyway.

What used to be a 20-cent local call has been "modernised" into a 1300 number at 55 cents a minute. I ended up paying \$1.02 to get recorded information on just one meeting.

Half the time was spent getting through the TAB's menu buttons.

A nice little earner for the new owners!

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