

MONSTER TAB'S MIXED BLESSINGS

By Bruce Teague



February is an interesting month. The kids go back to school. The hurricane season builds up. And the lawyers return from skiing in Colorado.

Which means that all the to and fro with mergers and MegaTAB (as we will call it) should finally sort itself out. But the hard question is what that MegaTAB will do for greyhound racing. It could be a worry.

Way back at the start, the various State TABs and their local racing codes all concluded friendly business agreements with each other. You supply so many races each year and we return you a percentage of the gross.

In most cases, each code's share of the take was fixed at the beginning.

Actual turnover didn't count. But since then greyhounds have managed to jump well past their assumed share, mostly due to the extra Twilight meetings. The dogs are now working for the horses, so to speak. W.A. and S.A. are moving to more flexible systems but, for the moment, NSW and Queensland are still stuck with the original figures.

Whatever else happens, the upcoming moves will leave a much bigger TAB dealing with the same old mix of small and traditional State-based racing organisations. Will those folk be able to take advantage of the corporate changes to renegotiate deals with MegaTAB? Let's hope so.

The Cash Flow

But what are we actually dealing with? Here is a rough run down on how all the money is moving around.

First, an indication of who bets on what.

As a small example, here are the Win pools in three different TABs for three different tracks on a recent Monday night.

Average Win Pools (\$000)

WP AP Shep

NSW 22.8 12.9 11.6 46.5%

Vic. 12.7 11.1 12.2 35.4%

Qld. 6.0 7.0 5.4 18.1%

40.8% 30.5% 28.7% 100%

Obviously, annual totals will be somewhat different but this is a rough guide.

Either way, a combination of TAB Ltd and either TABCORP or UNiTAB would dominate the market. Both options would take their share well past the half way mark.

But the last thing Queenslanders need is a merger between NSW and Victoria.

That would immediately send any serious punters south of the border to work in the larger pools.

Oddly, the area covered by UNiTAB (Qld, S.A., N.T.) has a population 2% greater than that of Victoria/Tasmania and only 18% smaller than NSW. This does not accord with the betting spread and suggests latent growth possibilities in Queensland. (Note: The above 18.1% figure for UNiTAB lines up with aggregate greyhound betting data but is well short of UNiTAB's all-code performance.

Bearing in mind that Queensland has Australia's most scattered population, this is a very good reason to promote provincial greyhound racing).

Second, let's look at the average Win pools on the NSW TAB in 2002. I have to use NSW figures as they are more readily available (for a few dollars TAB Ltd will supply you with a CD containing data for a whole year). That's OK because here we are looking at the relative popularity of tracks, not the absolute amounts.

The Top Five

\$27,980* Wentworth Pk
(Mon & Sat N)

\$21,550 Cessnock (Thu T)

\$20,590 Geelong (Fri N)

\$19,120 The Meadows (Sat N)

\$17,490* Richmond (Mon & Fri N)

Other Tracks

\$16-18,999 Bulli, Dapto, Singleton (T),

Sandown P, Gold Coast (T), Casino (T),

Maitland (T), Bendigo (T),

Cranbourne (T).

\$14-15,999 AlbionP*, Beenleigh (T) ** , Horsham (T), Hobart, Gawler (T), Nowra (T).

\$10-13,999 Gosford, Devonport (T), Angle P*, Traralgon (T), Ballarat, Shepparton.

\$7-9,999 Ipswich*, Warrnambool, Warragul, Launceston, Lismore (T).

* These are the averages of two night meetings each week. Figures for the busier nights (Sat and Fri resp. for Wenty and Richmond) would be larger.

** Now closed.

You can see right away that the most important stimulus for betting turnover is the timing - the day of the week and the time of the day. Late in the week is better - 15 of the 18 bottom meetings are run between Monday and Wednesday.

Unfortunately, because five of Queensland's seven betting venues race on those days it misses some of the cream.

For the dogs at least, that means a combination with a southern TAB can only improve things. On the other hand, Twilights do surprisingly well, often better than night meetings on the same day. Note Cessnock's high position despite its fairly ordinary fields - perhaps because lots of people get paid on Thursdays.

Third, are some races better than others?

Yes, if it's a really big event but otherwise it makes little difference.

For example, at the above Shepparton meeting the first four races were

maidens and included some unraced dogs. They averaged Win pools of \$11,300 while the remaining eight graded races pulled in an average of \$11,700. Not much to pick from there. Whatever's on will do.

Finally, what about patterns within a meeting? Well, almost everywhere turnover drops off as the night goes on. Typically, the last three races average 10% to 20% less turnover than earlier races.

While the turning point is usually about 10pm the exact reason for the change is uncertain. It could be that punters have to prepare for an early start the next morning or that many TAB outlets close early, particularly during the first half of the week.

So what conclusions can we draw? As things stand, betting is almost out of control of the greyhound code. Turnover is mostly a function of the social habits of pub and club patrons, many of whom clearly do not know their dogs. TAB efforts to compete with poker machines reinforce this trend - note the relative popularity of Mystery bets and lottery-style options

such as Pick 4/First 4, to say nothing of the horrible Spinners gamble in NSW (it's a complete dud anyway).

Big Punters to Return?

Happily, MegaTAB offers the potential for one big change. Nationally speaking, bigger pools must certainly bring back some of the bigger punters. More so, though, if the greyhound industry could mount some sort of campaign to promote more knowledgeable punting and gain some fresh customers.

At the same time, the prospect of a conga line of State greyhound administrations being picked off one by one by MegaTAB poses a real challenge.

It brings back memories of the new but high-cost Twilight meetings being rammed through the system during the 1990s, one club at a time, by the then-boss of SKY, Warren Wilson.

The same bloke now runs TAB Ltd, and possibly soon, MegaTAB. But whoever they are and however the TABs organise themselves, they are

still private monopolies and much more interested in their shareholders than in the racing codes.

It certainly looks like it is time for a single national greyhound body to do all TAB deals, working from a position of strength. And it would do no harm to have lots of friendly chats with Internet betting organisations.

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Improvement Award for 2003: We saw many fine performances during the year but the prize surely has to go to Frank Goulding and Rubblestorm. After a useful career as a dashing 400m runner and no more, the dog moved back up to 520m at Albion Park in November and then won six and placed four times in eleven races, some in very solid company. Pretty good for a dog over three years of age!

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Correction: In the last issue I showed the wrong address for Greyhounds Victoria.

It should have been www.grv.org.au.