

Racing commissioner has 'good bet' for state



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Racing Commissioner Ballenger: "The industry is extremely conservative, not creative, unimaginative, stodgy, in a period of re-thrinking."

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Michigan is missing a good bet, says state Racing Commissioner William S. Ballenger.

"The state is taking, taking, taking (from bettors) and putting nothing back. Michigan has the highest tax on racing in the country," said Ballenger, 43, in his Plymouth office.

If state government and the "stodgy" industry promoted horse racing a fraction as much as the state promotes its own lottery, the result could be healthier revenues for all, he said.

NEVERTHELESS, Ballenger insists horse racing is a better wager for the bettor than the state-run lottery.

"Bettors get back 80 cents on \$1 bet in racing. That's better than the lottery, which pays back 45 cents on a dollar."

"The (Bureau of the) Lottery spends \$5.5 million to advertise itself. The lottery takes no skill. It provides no entertainment."

"Racing spent barely \$1 million, cumulatively, to advertise itself in 1983. That's what I'm yelling about all the time."

Michigan's average tax on racetrack bets is 6.23 percent, highest in the nation, said Ballenger, a Republican of moderately conservative views. His approach to the job he has held for a little more than a year is one of promoting economic growth in an industry with a \$2-billion investment providing 12,000 jobs.

The bulk of racing activity is at the Detroit Racing Association course in Livonia (thoroughbred races and harness), Hazel Park (both kinds) and Northville Downs (harness). Outstate tracks include Jackson, Saginaw Valley Downs and Glendale Downs.

HE SHAKES his head at the suggestion of cutting racing dates to improve quality of races by eliminating inferior horses.

"The horse supply can support more races," he said. "You can make a case that, yes, cut the num-

ber of racing dates in half. The daily average of attendance and betting would go up very slightly, but nowhere near enough to cover the overall loss from fewer racing dates. I've examined the data from other states."

The Ballenger plan for improving the industry:

- On the demand side, promote racing more vigorously and make tracks more attractive by offering tax credits to improve aging tracks.
- On the supply side, cut Michigan's 6.23-percent tax on wagers to the 3.7-percent average of other states. Offer better purses to horse owners, and attract better horses. Revise racing rules.

Of the tax-cut proposal, he says, "The \$11 million in lost revenue is insignificant in a \$9-billion state budget. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to destroy the racing industry (through high taxes)."

BALLENGER BROUGHT to the job his experience in legislative politics, governmental administration and even some knowledge of farming, though little of racing. (The racing commissioner is organized under the Department of Agriculture.)

With a bachelor's degree magna cum laude from Princeton University and a master's in public administration from Harvard, the Flint native was a state representative at 28 and state senator. He was director of Licensing and Regulation for Gov. William G. Milliken and an assistant during the Ford Administration to then-NEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

Two times for Congress — one for the House and another in 1982 for the Senate nomination — were unsuccessful. But he has been honored with a distinguished service award from the Michigan Agricultural Conference and as one of Michigan's five outstanding young men by the Jaycees.

Ballenger is analytical, ebullient, erudite. The most prominent person in his office is not a politician or a triple-crown winner but the journalistic curmudgeon of Baltimore, H.L. Mencken.

RACING HAS been going steadily downhill in Michigan, both in attendance and wagering, for years, though the number of racing dates has been

doubled in the last two decades.

Attendance at the tracks last year was just under 2.4 million, lowest since 1942. The picture is worse than it appears, however, because 20 years ago there were only 234 racing days vs. 695 days in 1983.

But Ballenger sees some good signs.

Parimutuel wagering totaled \$253 million, up from a year earlier but still below the 1974 level. "Attendance at harness horse racing was up for the first time since 1970, reversing nearly a decade-long decline," Ballenger said. "Wagering on harness racing in 1983 totalled over \$216 million, an increase of more than \$5.3 million or 2.56 percent over 1982."

Why the slight upturn? Ballenger had three answers. "The steadily improving state economy; the absence of labor strife (first year since 1978 with no strikes) and the 'Say Yes to Michigan Horse Racing' promotional campaign."

"OUR TRACK population is changing. We're not attracting the young," Ballenger said.

"In terms of betting, per-capita betting continues to be high. It (the problem) is not what the patrons bet but getting them there in the first place. In Michigan, as the industry keeps losing the entertainment dollar, you're getting a concentration of the gamblers (compared to spectators). So the per-capita bet stays high."

"Michigan is losing population, and the younger ones are leaving. I don't think that shift is so pronounced, though, that racing couldn't make up for it."

Schoolcraft offers re-entry class

A free workshop for persons interested in re-entering college will be offered Thursday, July 26, at Schoolcraft College.

Counselor Gary Herschoren and Donna Sudick of the Learning Assistance Center will run the workshop from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in room B200 of the Liberal Arts Building on the main campus, 18800 Haggerty, Livonia.

Returning adult students Jan Munday and Walter Greer will share their experiences. There will be a question-and-answer period.

Registration material will be available. No reservation is necessary. Information on enrollment may be obtained by calling the college at 591-5400, Ext. 312 or 494.

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