

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S LEADING STUD FARMS



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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ NEALE DONNELLEY

MENANGLE PARK A New Beginning

When I first started covering harness racing more than 30 years ago, Sydney was number one.

Whenever you attended a feature meeting at Harold Park, Sydney's inner-city metropolitan headquarters, there was always a buzz of excitement, of expectation.

And there was always a big, enthusiastic and vibrant crowd on hand.

Over the past 10 or 15 years, things have changed in Sydney. It hasn't been Australia's premier city for the sport. In fact, there are many who would argue it comes in at about number four, behind Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, but that's an opinion thing.

There are many reasons, including declining turnover, integrity issues, small attendances, small track and so on and so on.

But, this is all about to change, and how.

Big change is underway in Sydney, and for the better. This change could see Sydney harness racing very quickly assume the mantle of number one again in this country.

In fact, as an outsider looking in, you would have to say the only way to describe what is happening in New South

Wales (Sydney is the capital city of New South Wales), would be 'exciting.'

Let me explain.

Harold Park is owned, administered and managed by the New South Wales Harness Racing Club. It has been in operation since 1949 when night harness racing started at the site, which had been purchased by the NSWHR in 1911.

Three years after Harold Park opened, the enterprising men then in charge at the Club, purchased 300 acres at a place called Menangle, some 60 kilometres out of Sydney.

In those days there was virtually nothing there except an 1,800 metre Thoroughbred gallops track, which also conducted occasional harness races. Racing, of sorts, had been conducted at Menangle from as early as 1914. Thoroughbred racing ceased there in 1941 due to World War 11, and not long afterwards the Government of the day banned proprietary racing (racetracks owned privately).

The then NSW Trotting Club purchased the site from the Government, built a state-of-the-art 832-yard harness racing track described, rightfully, as "the best throughout Australia." Racing commenced there in 1953. Twelve years ago, when the



Neale Donnelley

'new' Harold Park was re-opened after a track reconstruction, the NSWHR closed Menangle down as a racing centre, with the training of more than 200 horses on-going.

As Harold Park became less and less popular with punters and horsemen alike, many administrators embraced the topic of someday developing Menangle, but few, if any ever did anything concrete about it.

Enter the now CEO at Harold Park (NSWHR) John Dumesny, and Rex Horne, the Club Chairman. They sat down a few years ago with legendary horseman, Brian "Mr. Inter Dominion" Hancock.

These three men decided something had to be done to fix the industry in Sydney. It was stagnant and struggling at Harold Park.

It was time, they decided, to concentrate on Menangle Park, where 300 virtually untouched acres of land was going to waste.

According to Dumesny, that meeting was the turning point for the industry. "The industry was failing. We were in the

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doldrums. We all agreed that it was time to finally develop Menangle Park," Dumesny says now, looking back at a time which has changed his and a lot of people's lives.

This meeting between the 'Three Wise Men' became the catalyst for the new Menangle Park complex which had a remarkable opening day on June 29 which saw several speed records established.

A stunning 1,400 metre track, designed and built by America's track genius, Dan Coon, along with a new grandstand, modern re-furnished dining and participants' area and stabling highlight the track's amenities.

Seven Group 1 races, each carrying a purse of \$100,000 A (the Australian dollar currently equals 96 cents US) highlighted the most anticipated track opening since Albion Park was opened in Brisbane way back in 1983.

"So what?" I hear you saying. "How can this change the fortunes of the industry?" Again, let me explain.

While the inner-city Harold Park complex was becoming less and less popular as a racing venue, its position in the Sydney real estate market became more and more significant, and valuable.

The NSWHRRC owns the Harold Park site. Private inquiries put its value at a conservative \$150 million, and that's to a developer. Believe me, developers will fall over themselves to buy the land.

While Dumesny, as an employee of the NSWHRRC, cannot comment on any suggestion of a sale of the Harold Park site, think about the possibilities.

A sale of this magnitude would financially set up the NSWHRRC for the next 50 years and beyond. Use, say, \$30



The new Menangle Park immediately made an impression with several speed records being established on their recent opening night.

million to fund Menangle Park, and set up a training facility there like no other in the southern hemisphere. Then invest about \$120 million at about nine per cent, occasionally touching your original capital when needed.

Purses will double overnight. People who have had little to do with the industry for 10 years or more are showing interest in returning. They can see a chance to actually get a return on their investments.

I recently had a conversation with Meadowlands-based trainer Peter Walsh, an old school mate of mine doing quite well for himself in New Jersey.

All he could do was ask me about the Menangle Park project and the money a sale of Harold Park could generate for the industry. He also said it may well be the

impetus he needs to return to Australia along with his family. Peter spent several years in Sydney as assistant trainer to the then leading trainer, David Aiken, now a prominent player in Victoria.

And this reaction is not a one-off. Horsemen around the country are watching the Menangle Park project with great interest. High quality horsemen and women are thinking long and hard about the financial outcomes that look very possible, in fact, likely, if Harold Park is sold.

There is no doubt some will move, permanently, to work in the area.

That decision comes down to a vote of the New South Wales Harness Racing Club members, and it is this vote which will ultimately decide the fate of the industry in Sydney.

Take it for granted the members will

vote to sell Harold Park and move permanently to Menangle. Sure, it will be sad to say goodbye to their inner-city comfort zone, but the future benefits to the sport they all love far out-weigh the negatives.

Because most trainers have moved away from Harold Park, it doesn't really matter that Menangle is 60 kilometres from Sydney.

The area is widely considered to be in the centre of one of the fastest growing

urban precincts in Australia.

According to John Dumesny nearby Menangle Park will have 4,000 homes in it in five years.

"There will be 8,000 homes there in 10 years. Think about it," he muses.

"This whole project is about giving the industry some future. We will be erecting 200 to 400 new stalls for training purposes there. As soon as that is done, our very next project will be to apply for

lights and develop the training facility properly," he says.

"We haven't had much to feel good about here for a long time, but I'm here to tell you people in New South Wales are walking two feet taller at the moment.

"They can see a light at the end of the tunnel. They can see a real future for themselves and the harness racing industry and it all points to Menangle," he adds.

The club's administration headquarters would move from Harold Park to Menangle, which is logical, and Dumesny adds racing on a world class 1,400 metre track will have extraordinary spin-offs from faster times, attracting better stallions and more betting turnover.

"It means more money for more people and it means a vibrant industry," he says, enthusiastically.

"It's all about a new beginning." 

Neale Donnelley is a long time racing journalist who covered the sport for 20 years for the Melbourne Sun. He now hosts a daily radio program dedicated to racing.

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