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**THE EUROPEAN VIEW ~ By Klaus Koch**

## An Italian Tragedy

*Racing in Italy was shut down for a month this fall by a strike by horsemen who wanted, and obtained, more purse money.*

To the North American Standardbred industry Italy has probably been the most well known European harness racing country through the 20th century, although Sweden, through its many immigrant trainers, Wallner, Lindstedt, Johnson, Nordin, Eriksson and Takter, became more and more familiar towards the end of that century.

The Europeans have always been interested in the American trotter as racehorses as well as breeding stock. Danish and German owners and trainers also bought North American trotters as early as the 1880s. However, the Italians were bolder than the others aiming for the best stock from North America, and they continued for over a century to buy or at least try to buy some of the best North American trotters.

Horses like Muscletone, Nike Hanover, Elaine Rodney, Flamboyant, Elma, Timothy T, Yourworstnightmare, and CR Kay Suzie for racing and Armbro Goal, Homesick, Supergill and Self Possessed for stud duties were imported to southern Europe throughout the years.

Italy built up a fantastic, well functioning system of class races both for national juvenile trotters and for older

horses of international standard. Purses rose and rose, and last year the Derby for three-year-olds went for more than a million US dollars. The richest international race, the Lotteria in Naples, has been raced for almost a million dollars for many years, and it is not a stake race!

For Italian breeders times have been lucrative earning 18.18 per cent of the purse money every time one of their offspring have won. In international races the breeder of the best Italian horse receives all breeders purse money down to his place, which means, that if the best Italian bred horse finishes fifth in for instance the Lotteria, his breeder will get the breeders money from place one through four, meaning that the breeder of the fifth placed horse will earn more money than the owner of the second placed horse!

However, the glory eventually got out of hand. The central organization grew and grew along with the bureaucracy. At the same time the racing representatives missed a chance to secure a reasonable dividend from the betting turnover making Italy the country in Europe with the lowest benefit from the betting.

In Sweden we can expect 10 to 11 per cent of the gross turnover to flow



**Klaus Koch**

Photo by Monica Thors

back to the horsemen (tracks, purses, salaries etc.), when the similar percentage in Italy is four. When the U.N.I.R.E. (the Italian equivalent to USTA) took over the combined betting and broadcasting company SNAI, which was up over its ears in debt, the downward spin accelerated.

The government forced U.N.I.R.E. to hand over the handling of the betting to a state body, but the damage was already done. A couple of years ago I heard rumours about the U.N.I.R.E. having 50 million Euro (65 million dollars) in debt. The number of employees was now up to some 500 people. The Swedish equivalent, the STC, has 45 employees to do approximately the same amount of work, and yet the Swedish horsemen are complaining about that being too many.

U.N.I.R.E. has responded to the declining income and the escalating debt through reductions of purse money, which has caused a number of shorter strikes or similar actions through the last

decade, but an improvement was never achieved.

When the rumour came out at the end of September that the U.N.I.R.E. was definitely out of money, the reaction was swift. A big action, a strike, was started, involving all harness and Thoroughbred people.

A series of demonstrations took place in front of the parliament in Rome, and all tracks ceased racing. The strike commenced on October 6, just days before the Italian (Trotting) Derby. To European racing countries the Derby is the holiest thing on earth, and everybody thought that the strike would be interrupted in order to race the Derby on October 12. Declarations to start had already been made, but the horsemen remained firm; they went on striking through the Derby day, and for the first time in European history a Derby was cancelled.

Also the prestigious Gran Premio Orsi Mangelli (for three-year-old international trotters) in Milan on November 1st was cancelled, even that was unheard of. For several weeks an acceptable solution seemed far away.

Ideas for a solution however were expressed, and when the crisis quite suddenly ceased, just a couple of days before the deadline for this issue, it was due to

a demand from the horsemen which was voted through at the government level.

The Italian horsemen have been discontented with the fact that other sports gained a higher percentage of the turnover than the racing industry. For example, the national basketball league could expect twice as much of a percentage of the wagering on their games as the racing industry.

Discussions about the equality of percentages finally led to a legislative proposal from the opposition party Lega Nord, that the racing industry should receive one per cent of the slot machine turnover, which on a yearly basis is about 180 million Euro (225 million USD) to the industry. As the Thoroughbred and harness racing industries are almost equal concerning turnover, this should mean that harness racing could expect a 90 million Euros boost.

In order to achieve this change, the countrywide organized betting offices will have to refrain from 0.7 per cent turnover commission. The proposal was seconded by the Prime Minister Sergio Berlusconi already before government negotiations, and on Wednesday, November 5 the law amendment was officially released, meaning that the horsemen had achieved what they wanted, the strike was ended, and racing

commenced three days later.

In the amendment a 25 million Euro boost for the remainder of 2008 is included, which means that the harness racing industry will try to contest the cancelled major events, amongst them the Derby and the Orsi Mangelli, before the end of the year.

So the Italian tragedy finally came to a happy ending although on its way passed the stage of farce as well. The world wide harness racing community needs Italy, and after the release of the new amendment sighs of relief could be heard way beyond Italian borders.

This is all this time. Please do not hesitate to comment on my articles. My e-mail address is [ontrack@telia.com](mailto:ontrack@telia.com) and as usual I would be more than happy to get reactions from the North American harness racing fans. 🐾

Till next time,  
Klaus Koch

*Klaus Koch is one of Scandinavia's leading racing administrators and is perhaps best known for his former role as director of racing at Solvalla Racetrack. His duties included orchestrating the Elitlopp, one of the world's most prestigious races, and attracting North American and Australasian horses to compete in the event.*

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Happy New Year*

Carl, Debbie and Brandy Jamieson

