

CALIFORNIA RACING SECRETARIES

In an effort to give members an insight into the workings of the racing office, Owners' Circle compiled a list of commonly asked questions. We then submitted the list to and interviewed racing secretaries in both southern and northern California, who provided some interesting insight into their responsibilities and challenges. Contributing to this article were:

Mike Harlow, Director of Racing, Santa Anita Park and Oak Tree Racing Association
Martin Panza, Racing Secretary, Hollywood Park
Tom Robbins, Vice President, Racing, Del Mar Thoroughbred Club
Sean Greeley, Racing Secretary, Golden Gate Fields
Tom "Bomber" Doutrich, Racing Secretary, California Fairs

How do you decide which races, and class levels, are in the condition book?

Harlow: We try to balance out each week. Obviously on the weekends we want better quality, but not at the sacrifice of field size, because handle is better on weekends. So you try to mix a little bit of quality and field size. Sometimes we know a certain race will only draw five or six horses, like a classified allowance race, and we might card that on a Thursday or Friday rather than on the weekend, so we're not stuck with too many short fields on the weekend. Obviously we don't want to have all maiden 25's and \$12,500 claimers on the weekends just because they have full fields, so it's a constant battle to mix the quality and quantity.



Mike Harlow

On big race days, we may have 3 or 4 graded stakes, and that's the quality. You throw in a couple of decent maiden allowance races, and you're going to get field size there, and you fill in the rest – maybe a couple of grass races, where you tend to get better fields. So, it's like a puzzle where we're constantly trying to make sure we put the right pieces in the right spots.

When two or more races have an equal number of entries, how do you decide which race goes and which race does not?

Robbins: First, when we write a condition book, we put in the number of races we're planning on running each day. Then we may have a substitute race and/or extras.

If the condition book races have sufficient entries, as prescribed in our agreement with the TOC, then we use those races. If the book "goes," then there is no decision to make.

However, as an example, we may end up with one race that

doesn't have sufficient entries and there might be two extras – one with nine (turf) and one with seven (synthetic/dirt). We may have three races that day in the book scheduled on the turf and shouldn't run a fourth. We try to be fair; however, we must recognize all the variables. The "obvious" decision isn't always the one that will be made.



Tom Robbins

Panza: If it's a race in the condition book we're going to use it.

We're mandated by contract with the horsemen, if an allowance race has 6 in it, then it's going to go. Depending on the type of allowance race, if it's a three-other-than or a race that's hard to fill and it has five, we're probably going to use it. Then sometimes it matters what day it is, too. If it's Hollywood Gold Cup day or Santa Anita Derby day you may not want to use a five-horse field, so you may wait one more day and use it the next day.

We try to use common sense. And if a race is tough to fill and we do get five, my instinct is to use it. Because that race may not have gone for three months, and if we've got five in there, we want to give them a chance to run. And some people will get upset and ask, if the other race had ten in it, why didn't we use that one? Well, because these horses haven't run in three months, and those horses just ran three weeks ago. And that one with ten in it is going to go tomorrow, or the next day. We're not forgetting about the ten-horse field race. They'll get used, especially right now; I'd kill to have a 10 horse field – I might split it!

How do you decide which races to put on the overnight as extras?

Harlow: We look at the races in the condition book that didn't fill, and that's the first priority. Then, if a race overfills, we might

CALIFORNIA RACING SECRETARIES

bring it back; or, if a race is close to filling we tend to bring it back on the overnight. If trainers ask for a particular race, we typically point them to a race in the condition book. However, if we see an actual need for a category of race that we might have missed, we will try to write a race in the book.

Robbins: Ninety percent of the time, an extra race is a race in the condition book that either: 1) failed to fill on its published day, or 2) was a published race that “over-filled.” In either case we are trying to make a race for those horses which were not able to run on that day. Ten percent of the time an extra race may be a race that doesn’t conflict with a race in the book and a few trainers/owners have asked for it. Primarily the extra races one sees on any overnight can be traced back to a race in the condition book that either failed to fill or overfilled with excluded horses.

When do you actually decide which races are going on the overnight?

Harlow: During the morning; when we see which races are going to fill in the day’s condition book, then we decide which ones will be put on the overnight for extras the next day.

Obviously there will be days in the condition book that are stronger than others. So, we might save up an extra that we know will probably fill. For example, we might be filling for Saturday or Sunday and realize that next Thursday is kind of weak, so we might try to hold something for Thursday. Or maybe if a race overfills, instead of splitting it, we might bring it back as an extra – with an eye ahead if we think we might struggle next week. It’s a constant process.

Also, some races that we bring back on the overnight as extras continually get close to filling, so we want to keep bringing them back because that category of horse hasn’t run in a while. Typically, the better the race, the harder it is to fill. Sometimes we have to bring it back three or four days before we get that sixth horse and can use the race.

Actually, the fewer extras we have the better, because we are dealing with one “pie” of horses. The way we cut it up matters; it’s the same group of horses. So the more we can narrow our categories and offer fewer extras, the better off we are. I would like nothing better than to have the book go every day. Typically, at Santa Anita the condition book goes about 85 to 90 percent of the time. It just depends on the inventory and how many horses are ready to run.



Martin Panza

How do you determine your stakes schedule for a race meet?

Greeley: In the past, it depended a lot on the actual dates we had at Golden Gate. That dictated a lot as far as the purse schedule. After that, we basically look at historical races that have been run in the same time. And, of course, we take into account how much money we have to spend on stakes, depending on our purse budget.

Is Golden Gate Fields taking over stakes that were traditionally run at Bay Meadows?

Greeley: The only race we took over from Bay Meadows was the El Camino Real Derby. We were going to take the Bay Meadows Sprint and feature it as a graded stakes, but it lost a grade. So right now we have the Golden Gate Fields Sprint. But the El Camino Real Derby is the only race we have brought over from there, and that is because it’s a good three-year-old race, it is a Grade 3 stakes, and graded money is important going into the Kentucky Derby.

What measurement do you use to determine whether or not you put together a successful race card?

Doutrich: Well, first of all, we’ll talk numbers. But I don’t think field size is the total answer. There’s no doubt we want to see quality as well. In Northern California, we’ve really seen a drop-off, with five or six of our higher end trainers with higher end horses having relocated to Southern California, and we haven’t replaced them.

So, we’ve had some cards with 8, 10 or 12 horse fields, and they may be \$4,000-\$4,200 maidens. That may be good for business in the short run; but from a standpoint of having a good card, you want to see some strength, you want to see a good allowance condition too. We can write an allowance race up here every three or four weeks, but if we wrote them every week, they just wouldn’t go. It would be a bunch of short fields.

A good card has good balance – not all sprints, not all routes, but a balance of races. If you have turf available, that helps.

One decline we’ve seen in California racing is in distance races. We can barely get people to go a mile and an eighth anymore. I think that will change slowly, but obviously a great card would have some distance races.



Sean Greeley

What criteria do you use to assign a trainer stalls at your meet?

Robbins: Primarily we look at horses that will run at our meeting, and that indicate they *will* be afternoon participants. If they are currently racing, we look at their past performances. If not, we look at their workout patterns.

Del Mar is unique in that there's a greater urgency for trainers to get stalls, because the economics make it difficult for trainers to divide their stables. There is a greater need to be here at this facility than the other tracks. We allow outside pens as part of the allocation to assist with those horses that we recognize may not run at the race meeting, but based on the individual, or hardship a particular trainer may incur, we try to take care of them.

Then we look at individual trainers and their past participation, and take that into consideration. We also take into consideration the quality of the horses. You can't just look at the numbers, for instance, because claimers run more often than allowance or stakes type horses.



Tom Doutrich

Panza:The problem in Southern California is that there are too many stalls available. So there's no need for any criteria because there are empty stalls all over the place. How do you tell somebody they can't have stalls when there are 20 empty ones right down the shed row.

The system now is different than it was in the past. Thirty or forty years ago, there was only one barn area open, at the track that was running. If you didn't run, you didn't get stalls. In Southern California, we have people playing the tracks against each other. I have guys stabled at Santa Anita that don't run at all at Hollywood.

We're paying for Santa Anita to be open during Hollywood Park, but should I call and say the guy has to leave because he doesn't run at Hollywood, or vice versa? So, the system that was put in place 30 or 40 years ago doesn't really work for today.

As far as the stall issue, we look at every application and basically say, 'You have X number of horses racing, and Y number of horses working'. And if a trainer has, say, 12 racing and working, we might give him four more stalls for horses that aren't, so there's 16 total. The problem is that there are 30 stalls next to him that are empty. There was a reason why in the old days, the stall limit was 32 or 40, and they were pretty firm about it. And we've gotten away from that. Every trainer should get 24 stalls, no matter who you are.

Who do you view as the most important customer and why?

Greeley: I think the number one customer is always the fan – the bettor – because without them betting, and liking horse racing, none of us would be involved. So, that's number one.

I'd say second would be the owner. The owners are the ones who put their money in the game and buy horses, hire the trainers, and put the horses on the racetrack. And all the rest of us... we're just here doing our jobs.

What do you enjoy most about your job, and if you could change one thing about it what would it be?

Doutrich: I would say, from a Northern California standpoint, it would be that I get to work with the Southern California trainers. As an agent up here, and in some of the other parts of the business I was in, I didn't get to interact with them as much. Now I can actually get to know them.

I also like getting to know and interact with some of the owners. I think that one of the most important things, as a racing secretary, is to try to keep an even playing field. With the "King Kong" trainers in this day and age, it's very difficult for owners to believe you are being fair. But from my standpoint, the most important thing I can do is try and give and take as much as I can and try to create an even playing field.

I don't think there's ever a perfect day as a racing secretary. You still have to call some races off every day, so there are trainers and owners that were expecting their race to be used. But if you're going with a few bullets, meaning enough horses, and a facility that works, which most of them in California do, then you put together the best program you can. But there's no doubt it's probably one of the toughest positions on the racetrack.

What do you consider the hardest part of your job?

Doutrich: Keeping everybody happy; it's impossible!

The bottom line is some people do get the short end of the stick, and they take it personally. I finally learned I've just got to do the best I can, and offer them a chance to run their horses at a certain level. It's a dog fight out there, and the most important thing you realize is you just can't keep everybody happy, all the time.

How has your daily job changed, or how do you see it changing over the next five years?

Panza: I don't think my job has really changed that much. The world is on the internet now; that's what drives the world. From a racing standpoint, *Incompass* (racing office software) certainly is a help. We have more data and we can see more information. But in some ways, doing it the old way – by hand – made you pay more attention because you were collecting the data yourself. Now the internet has made it very simple.

If I want to see a past performance on a horse I can get it in a second, whereas before I had to call the *Form* and six hours later maybe it would show up. It's much more convenient; there's no doubt about it.

Has it changed the job any? Not really. The job is still about filling races and putting horses on the racetrack.