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N J RACING: A SPECIAL REPORT

TODAY'S NEWS:
Jim Morrill Jr. suspended in Ky., p. 7

WILL THE MEADOWLANDS SURVIVE?

By Bill Finley

There was a time when an opening night at the Meadowlands was an event, something that generated excitement inside and outside the big building in the swamps of North Jersey. The place would be packed and the racing would be great, reminders that the sport at the Meadowlands was bigger, better and more lucrative than anything else offered anywhere else in the world of harness racing. Where did it all go?

It certainly wasn't there last Saturday as the Meadowlands kicked off a fall meet of harness racing, grabbing that spot on the calendar because the thoroughbreds had abandoned the place. The all-sources handle was a meager \$1.75 million, there were three seven-horse races, the biggest purse of the night was \$16,000 and all the sport's top drivers were instead at The Red Mile. The attendance? Let's just say it wasn't much.

Not that any of this came as a surprise. The Meadowlands, where success once seemed impenetrable, is in the midst of a crisis, in a fight for its life. That the quality of the



Racing's future at the Meadowlands, NJ's premiere standardbred facility, is up in the air.

racing, field size, handle and attendance have all fallen is just one part of a larger problem.

The Meadowlands is owned by the state of New Jersey, whose governor has made it clear that he has no intention of funneling money into the track to keep it going, money, he says, the state cannot afford. Making the Meadowlands profitable again is a tall order. The economy is bad, interest in harness racing continues to wane across the country and more and more of the good horses are leaving for Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York, where slots have bumped purses up to record levels. Those are among the reasons the once highly profitable track has become a money-loser. (Cont. P. 3)



FIRST OVER
Andrew Cohen

BEGGARS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS

There are several good things about the new gaming and racing "business plan" proposed last week by Democratic officials in New Jersey. For starters, it's not Governor Chris Christie's stark plan, announced earlier this year via the Hanson Report. If implemented, that plan would doom harness racing in the Garden State. The new plan, by contrast, likely would stabilize the horse industry in New Jersey for at least a few more years. And right now, especially considering the alternatives, that's a good thing.

But even as we see glimmers of light in the darkness for the track and its community we should not pretend that the new plan is a viable long-term solution for the industry's woes in the Garden State. It's not designed to make horse racing an equal partner, or even a junior partner, with Atlantic City. Harness racing has come to Trenton hat in hand, weakened in its political clout by its lack of internal foresight and accountability, and battered by years of neglect and arrogance. Why would a group of casino-lobbyist-infused lawmakers expend the political courage to throw it more than a bone? (Cont. P. 2)

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(Cohen, cont.)

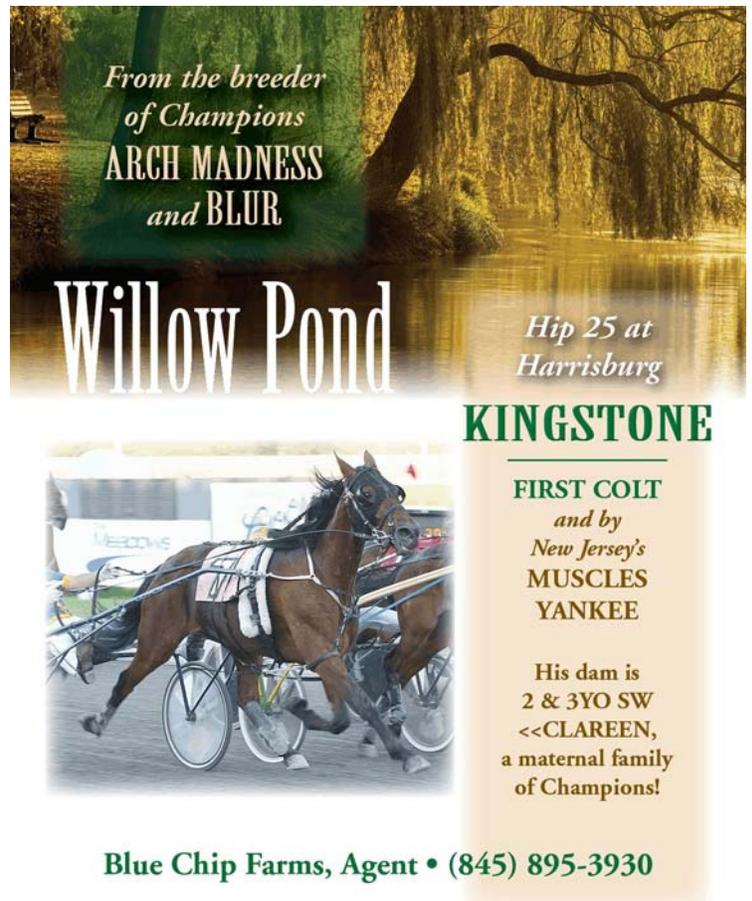
Republican Christie “put out a report [the Hanson Report] that created winners and losers—the casinos were the winner and the tracks were the losers,” Democratic Senate President Stephen Sweeney said of his party’s new proposal, “... we came up with what I think are more viable options.” The first half of Sen. Sweeney’s statement is certainly true. The Hanson Report was outrageously one-sided even by Trenton’s standards of obedience to Atlantic City. As for the second half of the remark, we’ll see. In any event, neither half acknowledges that both proposals leave largely intact Atlantic City’s monopoly on gambling in the state.

In its present form, the Sweeney Plan doesn’t bring slots or other forms of gaming to the Meadowlands to transform it into a world-class racino just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Nor does the proposal seem to link in any meaningful way gaming and racing interests so that both may benefit from the obvious synergies they could share. Instead, the new plan, like the old plan, appears to recognize and foster the same counterproductive and unnecessary intrastate divide; the casinos will remain the over-subsidized haves; the racetracks, the under-subsidized have-nots.

For example, as it did in the Hanson Report, Trenton again is offering Atlantic City a huge prize—Internet betting for the casinos there—as part of the Sweeney plan. Some industry analysts predict this will generate hundreds of millions of dollars in additional revenue for gaming interests—this for an industry that already has been massively subsidized for decades by state and local government. So what is Trenton seeking from Atlantic City in return for this online windfall?

Not much. And if you don’t believe me, just ask Sen. Sweeney himself. The specific new Democratic proposals—more OTB sites, new wagering—are “low-hanging fruit that hasn’t been touched,” he told the Star-Ledger last week, “... there are ways to generate revenues out there that have not been explored.” In New Jersey, evidently, the survival of the state’s enormous horse industry is worthy of reaching for low hanging fruit—but no higher. And certainly not so high as to meaningfully encroach upon Atlantic City’s kingdom.

As we discuss the merits of the Sweeney plan, we shouldn’t forget the ultimate goal here. It remains a vibrant and stable harness industry that is self-sufficient, creative in its approach to producing a compelling product, and aggressive in its marketing and distribution. The industry in New Jersey has to attract new capital in the form of new owners and breeders—otherwise the market for New Jersey-bred horses will shrivel up. It has to attract new fans and bettors—otherwise the Big M will remain largely a ghost town with dwindling handle. Even the Sweeney plan, never mind the Hanson Report, seems to impose obstacles



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to these improvements.

For example, the Democrats say they want to “lower operating costs” at the Meadowlands. If this means only fewer dates at the track in favor of larger purses and more quality racing that can be better marketed, it’ll be a good thing. But if “lower costs” also means the New Jersey Sports Exposition Authority will now spend even less in maintenance and upkeep than has been done recently to keep the Big M operating, it’ll be a very bad thing. If the Meadowlands is going to survive beyond a few years, and if it is to attract and keep new fans, it must be renovated and not left to slide further into disrepair.

Hopes and dreams and wishes aside, the Sweeney plan, or whatever ultimately is ginned up out of it as a result of political forces, will mark only a passage into a new phase in horse racing’s battle for survival in New Jersey. As an industry, we still have to get our own act together. If the Sweeney plan buys us a few more years, I am all for it. After all, beggars can’t be choosers. But the sport will survive long-term only if we wisely use that time to rebuild a fan base, restore integrity to racing, and replace tired, old leadership with fresh, new voices. Sen. Sweeney is telling us the industry doesn’t yet deserve to die; he’s not guaranteeing that we have a right to live.

Will the Meadowlands Survive? cont.

Other racetracks have been in similar binds, but that they have been bailed out by slot machines. That has not happened at the Meadowlands because Atlantic City and its many friends in New Jersey politics haven't let it happen. At least Atlantic City used to help, albeit unwillingly. The casinos had been forced to contribute \$30 million a year to thoroughbred and harness purses in return for the tracks not going after slots. But the racing industry has been told not to ever expect that money again.



Tom Luchento

It's a mess, such a mess that just about everyone is worried that Governor Chris Christie might just solve the problem by simply shutting the place down? Would he? The answer, unfortunately, is yes.

Losing the Meadowlands would be devastat-

ing to the entire industry, so much so that even racing officials in Canada are worried sick.

"The Meadowlands and the Woodbine Entertainment Group tracks are widely regarded as the two premier standardbred wagering products in North America, so if the Meadowlands were to close, thousands of simulcast customers would immediately have one less high quality product to focus on," said Bruce Murray, Woodbine's vice president of standardbred racing. "We're very concerned this would cause many to leave harness racing altogether and invest their entertainment dollars elsewhere. Our stakes programs complement one another so those horse owners that invest heavily in buying New Jersey-bred yearlings, not to mention racehorses, would lose that avenue to race their young horses at. That will have a devastating effect on the breeding farms in New Jersey and surrounding states. A healthy Meadowlands is vital to sustaining the sport in the US and beyond."

To keep the Meadowlands going, a motivated group of horsemen, breeders, track employees and some politicians that haven't sold their souls to Atlantic City are working to keep the Meadowlands alive and to provide a blueprint for future prosperity. The place may be hanging by a thread, but it isn't dead yet. While there is life, there is hope.

"Normally, I'm a worry wart. but, with this, I'm optimistic," said Tom Luchento, the president of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey. "I'm not even cautiously optimistic. I'm straight out optimistic that we'll have something going really strong down the road."

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Luchento is the point man for the effort to save racing at the Meadowlands. You wouldn't want to be him. He has the toughest job in harness racing right now and so many people are depending on him. But he's working hard, telling anyone who will listen why it's so important to save the harness racing industry in New Jersey and why the state's politicians simply can't role over and let Atlantic City have whatever it wants at racing's expense.

Luchento's mission is twofold--to keep racing going in the short term at the Meadowlands and also to figure out a way to guarantee that the track continues beyond the near future and becomes healthy enough that no one will have to worry about its survival ever again.

As the clock winds down on 2010, the 2011 racing schedule at the Meadowlands remain uncertain. But every indication is that there will be racing at the Big M next year. The issues will start to become clearer at a Nov. 10 meeting in Trenton with the New Jersey Racing Commission. That's when the state's racetracks must apply for 2011 dates. By law, the Meadowlands must apply for a minimum of 141 days and Freehold has to ask for a minimum of 168. However, after the dates are approved, the tracks can go back and ask for amended schedules. According to Luchento, the current plan on the table calls for 100 days of racing at the Meadowlands and 100 days at Freehold.

"We have a calendar set up, a tentative calendar," he said. "The Meadowlands will race three days a week for the first four months or so of the year and then we'll take a break and come back for the rest of the year. When we come back, we'll mainly race Fridays and Saturdays. We'll race 100 days at the Meadowlands and see how that works. I'm not saying that will be a perennial thing. I want to leave that option open. If gaming comes, we'll want those days back."



The future is also uncertain at Freehold Raceway

Some of the dates at the two tracks would overlap, but some attempt will be made to have Freehold and Meadowlands racing at different times during the year.

As for purse levels, Luchento said that will depend on whether or not the track receives any additional funding from casinos or the state to supplement purses. Without funding, he believes purses, excluding stakes races, will average about \$135,000 a night.

"We ended up somewhere around \$170,000 a night for 2010," Luchento said. "Let's face it, we were having a hard time getting horses in there at 170. What are you going to get for 130, 140? What I explained to the people I've been speaking to in the governor's office and in the legislature, if you have a meet like that what do you really accomplish? You don't accomplish anything, because the meet looks worse than ever."

With funding, Luchento believes purses, excluding stakes race, would average about \$320,000 a night.

Freehold officials are hoping purses there will be comparable to 2010 levels at about \$40,000 to \$45,000 a day.

The key for the Meadowlands in 2011 will be to get some sort of financial help from the state. That will mean the difference between a quality meet with good purses and a poor meet, lousy purses and the continuing decline of the Meadowlands. Though Christie has been adamant in his public statements that the state is no longer interested in throwing money at the harness racing industry, Luchento and others are confident help is on its way.

A recent plan introduced by Senate Democratic members of the Legislative Gaming Summit that meet several times in recent months has come up with a formula for reviving the state's racing industry. Among other things, it calls for the building of more OTBs and approving exchange wagering. What it has really done is buy the racing industry time. Racing leaders and Democrats have told

Trenton that they have a plan that will save racing and one that does not include slot machines at the racetracks. But the plan will take time to implement. In the meantime, they need "bridge money" to keep things afloat. The hope is that the same \$30 million the casinos had been providing racing will be forthcoming, though perhaps from a different source.

"We're being told there is a 75 to 80 percent chance that something positive will happen," said a political insider who asked that his name not be used. "There's a high probability that the legislature will sign a bill that will do several positive things for the racing industry. The governor will still have to sign it. But we think he will. The racetracks need money right away and (Senate President) Steve Sweeney is telling people he has found the money. Where is he going to get it from? No one quite knows."

On the thoroughbred side, leaders of the horsemen's group are hearing a similar story.

"There is a tremendous amount of legislative support to do something to keep racing afloat until some long-term funding solution can be developed," said John Forbes, who heads the New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association. "Those are good vibes. It's a large number of legislatures that believe that's something that has to be done."

Once the 2011 situation is clarified, Luchento and others can begin to focus on the long-term future of harness racing at the Meadowlands and in New Jersey. Again, there are plenty of problems and no obvious solutions.

The easiest fix would be to put slot machines in at the Meadowlands and to have racing share in the profits with the state and a consortium of Atlantic City casino operators. That doesn't look likely, not when Christie and Jon Hanson, the author of the controversial Hanson Report on the future of racing and gaming in New Jersey, have made it clear that they have no intention of going against Atlantic City's wishes and bringing alternative gaming to the Meadowlands. But Luchento says it would be foolish to give up on efforts to bring slots to East Rutherford.

"How long do you think the state of New Jersey can hold off on \$1 billion a year going into the budget (from slots at the Meadowlands)?" Luchento said. "How long can the legislators, the ones that are holding us back, say no to \$1 billion a year going into the budget? How long can South Jersey hold Central and North Jersey hostage when you have that kind of money looking at you? The governor wants to give Atlantic City a fair chance to make it. He thinks they will make it or else he wouldn't be going the way he is going. But I think Atlantic City is going to have a very hard time with all the competition they face. That's why I am optimistic. Something has to give. You just can't hold all that money back out of the budget when the state is doing as bad as it is doing." (Cont. P. 5)

If slots do not come to the Meadowlands, then the harness racing industry may have to rely on the plan put forth recently by the Democrats working.

"From the outset, the process has always been about rejecting the conventional wisdom that Atlantic City, the Meadowlands and the horse racing industry could not be brought together," said Senator Jim Whelan (D-Atlantic), the co-chair of the task force. "This is a comprehensive approach that will protect the jobs of our casinos and race-tracks and support and prove that solutions do not have to come with winners and losers. If we act quickly to get this plan in place, everybody wins."

On the racing side, the plans calls for streamlining operations at the Meadowlands and Monmouth, enhancing the New Jersey Sire Stakes and Breeding Development program and enabling the Meadowlands to run a short "elite" meet patterned after the successful experiment at Monmouth Park. It also calls for getting several more OTBs up and running in the state. The law allows for 15 OTBs in New Jersey, but only three are currently operating. In the plan, exchange wagering would pump money into the racing industry and "Instant Racing" games, which allows gamblers to bet on archived races on a device that looks something like a slot machine, might also be legalized and put in at the tracks.

"What (politicians) have liked is that we are coming up with solutions that were never proposed before," said Scott Fellin, who is a financial administrator for Deo Volente Farms. "They've told us that every other time all they heard from us was that we need slots. The same arguments became trite. Now that we've proposed other things like Instant Racing and Internet gaming they are more willing to listen."

The Democratic plans also calls for measures that would keep Atlantic City happy, like legalizing intrastate Internet gambling and putting a measure on the ballot to legalize sports betting at the casinos.

Will it work?

As for the elite meet concept, some wonder how much handle can grow at the Meadowlands when the track already has such a large share of the total amount being bet in this country on harness racing.

"There is minimal betting at all standardbred racetracks other than the Meadowlands, as the numbers clearly indicate," said Bob Marks, the marketing director for Perretti Farms, the state's biggest breeder. "Consequently, it's

difficult to imagine just where this extra handle is going to come from, regardless of how elite an elite meet turns out to be."

New Jersey breeder Mike Gulotta worries that nothing positive will happen until the Meadowlands is refurbished and made to be more aesthetically pleasing and the quality of the racing product is improved.

"Harness racing can absolutely be self-sustaining in this state, but we cannot stick to the old model," he said. "You have to have full fields. You have to have a high quality product. And people need to be drawn there. We are an instant gratification society and we are an attention deficit society. When people are not betting the horses they have to be doing other things, whether that means dining in places that are pleasant and with good food or playing skee ball or hanging out at a sports bar. You cannot have a dank, dirty, run-down environment and expect people to be there. It's not going to happen. The Meadowlands revolutionized the sport with high quality one-mile

racing and full fields. That's what we need to get back to, but the facility itself needs to be refurbished and there needs to be several revenue generating entertainment options there. Do that and there will be a synergistic effect. The racing will buttress the entertainment business and the entertainments business will draw on-track attendance and handle."

Still another option is that the state gets out of the racing business all together and lets private enterprise

take over the tracks. Christie has advocated that, but, so far, no takers have emerged. With both Monmouth and the Meadowlands losing money and with there being little chance the tracks will get slots in the near future, it's understandable why no outsider has yet to come forward to attempt to buy the tracks. But prominent owner and breeder Eric Cherry believes that eventually someone will come forward to do just that and that a smart businessman can make the Meadowlands profitable.

"If you do this right, absolutely it can work," Cherry said. "I can easily see someone coming in and turning it into a profitable business. But you're not going to be able to do that unless you once again make it the mecca of harness racing with quality racing and good purses."

In the meantime, many in the New Jersey harness racing industry are playing the waiting game, waiting to see what happens before plotting their next moves.

(Cont. P. 6)



A stretch duel at the Meadowlands. A thing of the past?

At Perretti Farms, Marks isn't quite sure what the future will mean for one of the sport's biggest breeders. New Jersey's problems are a constant concern.

"(Farm owner) Bill Perretti is closer to 84 than 83 and I'm not sure how many new horizons are on the agenda," Marks said. "He questions our current situation every day, though as you can see by obtaining new stallions like Rocknroll Heaven and Lucky Chucky, we're still playing the game. The Jersey scenario is not healthy and the moderate Jersey breeds took a bath at the Lexington sale. Unfortunately, we're here and the expense of relocation elsewhere would be prohibitive. In addition, most of the land is in farmland preservation, which further complicates things. Therefore, before actually moving to Pennsylvania there might be thoughts of a dispersal if the Meadowlands situation doesn't improve or tends to look hopeless."

At Freehold, management is trying to make the best of a bad situation. Freehold has largely been overlooked amid the concerns over the Meadowlands, but, it, too, has problems.

"I'm not saying Freehold is making money because that's not the case," said Chris McElean, who oversees that racing operation for Penn National Gaming, part owner of the track. "We're trying to operate based on the current business levels. We've had to make a lot of business decisions there, some of them not too pleasant, like personnel cuts. We're trying to survive, keep things going. We have no plans to cease racing or sell the property. We're just going to try to manage it and run it as efficiently as we can based on the business levels. But I will say we don't have a five-year plan or anything like that. It's a struggle."

With the Hambletonian, what would happen if it had to find a new home?

"For me, the Hambletonian and the Meadowlands are almost one and the same," said Frank Antonacci, the trainer of the powerful Lindy Farms racing operation. "It's a major situation when your marquee event and your major venue are at stake; it's a major situation that needs to be addressed. Obviously, the formula they have now doesn't work and something needs to change, whether it's revamping the meet or reducing the days to make it more of an elite meet. There needs to be some sort of reformulation that makes it a viable option for the state of New Jersey."

Elsewhere, people continue to do the best they can to convince politicians and others that New Jersey harness racing is way too important to let die. Is Christie listening?

"I want horse racing to continue in New Jersey," Christie said at a recent campaign appearance in Pennsylvania for Republican candidates there. "If there's a model that doesn't require government money, I'm sure we'll be able to work it out. I appreciate the proposal the Democrats made. I think there's a lot of similarities between the two and we'll be able to work it out."

What you have is some optimism, some pessimism, some wishful thinking and a few, but not a lot, of answers. The Meadowlands will be here in 2011 in some way, shape or form. Beyond that? No one really knows. The fight continues.

Get it Write



HOW TO BEAT ATLANTIC CITY

By Bill Finley

This is nothing less than a war, horse racing versus Atlantic City, and when it's over, harness racing at the Meadowlands might just be a casualty. That may not be a comforting thought considering the dire consequences of a darkened Meadowlands or the fact that Atlantic City has more money and more influential allies than horse racing does. It even has the most important politician in the state, Chris Christie, taking sides--its side.

But horse racing can still win. Here's how:

Beat Atlantic City at its own game, the waiting game.

It's obvious what the Atlantic City casinos are up to.

They're waiting to put in their own casino in North Jersey, maybe at Xanadu, maybe in the Meadowlands grandstand itself. They've been waiting for years, all the while doing whatever they can behind the scenes to put racing out of business in New Jersey. As soon as they kill harness racing at the Meadowlands, they can move right in with their slot machines and table games and whatever else and keep all the money for themselves.



Atlantic City, a tough, but not unbeatable, foe

Then, not a penny will have to be shared with racing, harness or thoroughbred.

They've been playing this game for years, all the while making the argument that their real worry is how a Meadowlands casino will hurt business in Atlantic City itself. It's nothing but a lie. They want the Meadowlands all to themselves, and they've been waiting patiently to make that a reality. When Jon Hanson came out with his report and Chris Christie started talking like Hanson was some sort of savant, the boys in Atlantic City no doubt started dancing on the boardwalk. Surely, they must have been thinking, our wait is almost over. Harness racing will get out of our way any second now. (Cont. P. 7)

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(Finley, cont.)

What the Meadowlands needs to do is merely survive. As long as there is some sort of meet, any kind of meet, at the Meadowlands, the politicians and the forces in Atlantic City are going to have a very hard time taking over. As much as they'd like to, they can't just come in with a bulldozer and run everyone over and build a casino.

That means never agreeing to shift the meet to Atlantic City Race Course or Monmouth or one of the training centers. That means finding ways to be self-sustaining, even if that means significant purse cuts. That might mean a much shorter meet, 100 days or maybe less. It's going to mean sacrifices from everybody—owners, trainers, breeders, track employees. Even if it means limping along, limp along.

"We're going to stick this thing out," said Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey President Tom Luchento, who is leading the fight to preserve racing at the Meadowlands. "We're not going to get out of the way because in my opinion if we were out of there tomorrow there would be a casino there within one year. We all understand that. I'm not going away that easy."

Win the waiting game and you've won the war. The weakness in Atlantic City's plan is that it can't afford to wait forever to build a Meadowlands casino. Business is terrible in Atlantic City these days, thanks entirely to out-of-state casinos that have cut AC's profits to shreds. With casinos coming into Maryland and at Aqueduct and with the economy still a mess, it's only going to get worse. At some point, Atlantic City will have to surrender, it will have to agree to go in with the racing industry on a Meadowlands casinos, because that's the only way they can start making serious money again. If that happens, purses go through the roof and the Meadowlands is back to being healthy. You get to that point by fighting, refusing to give up and making sure that your enemies never allow harness racing to be halted at the Meadowlands.

The next few years don't figure to be good ones for New Jersey harness racing. Who knows what the 2011 meet will look like at the Meadowlands or how long it will be or how bad the purses will be? Just find a way. Find a way to survive and be patient. Sooner or later, Atlantic City will blink.

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TODAY'S NEWS

MORRILL SUSPENDED BY KENTUCKY AUTHORITIES

Jim Morrill, Jr. has been suspended by the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission following an incident involving a breathalyzer test last Saturday which resulted in his being removed from several drives at the Red Mile.

"He is suspended pending an appearance before the judges," said Marc Guilfoil, deputy executive director of the KHRC, referring to a ruling issued on Monday.

As of Tuesday morning, a hearing date had not been scheduled. Guilfoil expected the hearing to be set in "the next couple of days."

The circumstances surrounding what happened Saturday are not clear, and Morrill did not return phone calls seeking comment. He will be represented by prominent attorney Howard Taylor, the co-owner of champion mare Buck I St Pat.

According to Taylor, the crux of the matter centers on whether a breathalyzer machine was on the grounds at the Red Mile, and whether Morrill submitted to a test. "My understanding, and I have not yet met with Mr. Morrill, is that there was no breathalyzer," Taylor said. "That's an issue that is up in the air. It was an unfortunate, embarrassing situation for everybody."

Taylor was surprised that a suspension was issued before the hearing took place.

"I don't know how that's possible," Taylor said. "Traditionally, it is a fine, only. I don't know how you're suspended pending a hearing. I'm not saying he is going to defend his position. He certainly has that right and has to be afforded the opportunity to exercise it or waive it. He's had neither, so far."

Morrill is next slated to drive on Wednesday night at Pocono Downs. He has 369 wins this year to rank 19th nationally. Morrill is 12th in earnings on the season with \$6.6 million.



Jim Morrill, Jr.