



ONTARIO HARNESS HORSE ASSOCIATION

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Horse Racing Needs a Voice: A Call for Self-Determination

The Case for Change

In an August 18, 2025, a Paulick Report article titled "Horse Racing Needs War Rooms," award-winning reporter Andrew Cohen echoes a truth the Ontario Harness Horse Association (OHHA) has championed since 1998: the horse racing industry urgently needs a strong, independent, industry-funded voice. This voice must advocate freely and effectively for horse people and the broader equine agricultural industry, unencumbered by reprisals from racetrack operators and casinos who prioritize land development and private profit over our industry's survival.

The Rise and Fall of SARP

In 1998, Ontario's Slots at Racetrack Program (SARP) was fully established to balance competing interests. It required the province of Ontario to operate the gaming business and share revenues with horse persons, municipalities and racetrack operators, ensuring racing's viability. Racetrack operators were mandated to re-invest in their core business of horse racing and pari-mutuel wagering.

The logic was clear: horse racing, a cornerstone of the equine agricultural industry, generates billions in economic activity and employs tens of thousands, particularly in rural Ontario. SARP's model succeeded initially, boosting purses, increasing wagering and inspiring similar programs across Canada and the U.S. Casinos or racinos as they came to be known, gained access to gamblers, which in turn increased government revenues, while horse people raced for increased prize money. This partnership with the government flourished when in 2012, everything changed. The government of the day, without industry consultation, privatized the gaming industry, turning gaming revenues over to private gaming companies mostly based in the US. Racetrack owners were converted to landlords, with no obligation to invest revenues into the equine industry. This is now referred to as de-coupling.

The alliance was now more than tenuous. Profit-driven, often U.S.-based gaming companies saw racing as a competitor, siphoning wagering dollars from slot machines. Horse racing became a drag on their bottom line. The dismantling began with a calculated strategy: discredit advocates as complainers, then privatize gaming. In Ontario, SARP's end left horse people reliant on government subsidies alone. Purses plummeted, tracks closed, and facilities fell into disrepair. Backstretches emptied, grandstands sat barren, and the equine agricultural industry scrambled for their very livelihoods and existence. Other jurisdictions followed, decoupling gaming revenues from racing purses, further shrinking the industry.

A Broken Model

Twenty-five years later, OHHA's warnings have proven prophetic, but saying "we told you so" offers no progress. The model is broken. Gaming companies, driven by profit, were never going to sustain a rival industry competing for the same wagering dollars. Without enforceable conditions, their commitment to racing was always a facade.

Is Horse Racing Dead?

Far from it. With forward-thinking leadership, self-reliance, and government recognition of our right to self-determination, horse racing and the equine agricultural industry can thrive. The equine industry remains an economic powerhouse, supporting jobs and communities in ways casinos cannot match. As gaming shifts online, replacing workers with AI and algorithms, its economic impact will fade. Meanwhile, horse racing and the broader equine agricultural industry strives to rebuild, focusing on fan engagement, better service, and a compelling product. The two industries are diverging—and that's a good thing.

A New Vision: Horse People in Control

While Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG) claims to operate "like a not-for-profit" in its land development plans, a truly horse person-operated, gaming-equipped racetrack would embody that principle. Every wagered dollar would fund the industry's sustenance and promotion. As a not-for-profit, our books would be transparent, with public audits ensuring accountability. Run by horse people for horse people, this model would free casinos to pursue land development and online gaming while we reclaim and revitalize our racetracks. Fans would choose between soulless gambling or a dignified, engaging experience. That's the power of competition—a win for horse people, fans, and the industry.

A Call to Action

Andrew Cohen's article amplifies what insiders have long whispered: casinos never wanted racing. They sought only the billions in wagering dollars. This unnatural alliance has run its course. Now is the time for horse people to take the reins, restore our facilities, and secure our future. Together, we can bring horse racing and the entire equine agricultural industry home, beyond sustenance to where it rightfully belongs in our economy and our history.

The Blueprint

The equine agricultural industry is due proper respect and recognition. Full stop. We are an economic powerhouse and deserve to be treated as such. All it takes is a level playing field, a way to self-determine our destiny and to compete with multi-national gaming companies, those corporations currently unfettered in access to Canadian

gaming customers and their bank accounts. To get there, we require a direct partnership with our government; to be recognized as equal stakeholders focussed on sustaining and expanding our rural economy and the equine agricultural industry. It starts with granting the industry a gaming license and includes a commitment to the guiding principles of SARP. Indeed, the blueprint for success was established in 1998. All it takes is a shift back to those lofty goals and a deletion of the middleman- the casinos who want nothing to do with racing or the broader equine agricultural industry.

Time is indeed running out. Soon there will be little left to salvage. Let's get back to the future. Correct the mistakes of the last two decades and put the equine agricultural industry and the salt- of -the-earth people of rural Canada back on to the road to prosperity. Keep Canadian money in Canada, for our workers, our communities and most of all, our future.

Post time beckons.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jim Whelan', with a stylized, flowing script.

Jim Whelan

President Ontario Harness Horse Association/Ontario Equine Education and
Employment Program (OHHA/OEEEP)

