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Canadian horse racing industry desperate for a comeback

By ELIZABETH RENZETTI

Seattle Slew, Glorious Song, Zenyatta, Cigar, all the way back to Seabiscuit, Northern Dancer and, of course, the magnificent Secretariat – thoroughbreds that captured the imagination of North Americans everywhere. Now, the entire horse-racing industry is in peril, victim of a one-armed bandit and staggering complacency.

Ian Howard stands at the rail of Woodbine's training track, binoculars in one hand, stopwatch in the other. The tools of his trade. Under a baseball cap, the trainer's face is sunburned, his eyes focused on a speck up the track, thundering toward him.

Maybe this horse is the one. Maybe not. Skyrish is three years old, a handsome bay colt who won his first race but was pipped at the post in his second. That he's here at all is a bit of a miracle: Last year, Skyrish broke his pelvis and spent five months in his stall recovering. Thoroughbreds are funny that way, like locomotives balanced on drinking straws. One wrong step and *phfft* – thousands of dollars and somebody's dream down the drain, and a horse's life destroyed.

It's tempting to see Skyrish as a symbol for the entire North American horse-racing industry: hobbled, nearly broken, desperate for a comeback. In Europe, Australia and parts of Asia, racing continues to flourish, but on this continent – especially in Ontario, the heart of Canadian industry – the sport of kings is beggared.

"I almost packed it in last year," says Howard, 54, when Skyrish has finished his workout.

The bottom fell out of the Ontario racing industry when the provincial government yanked the money-making slots machines at racetracks program. Since 1998, slot players at tracks like Woodbine had subsidized horse racing, allowing it to grow fat and, most people agree, complacent. But pulling the plug was a sudden and devastating blow for people who race thoroughbreds, and much worse for those who breed standardbreds (the harness horses that make up most of the racing in Canada).

Yet, Howard is still here, because horse racing is famously a sport in which rational behaviour runs a distant second to love and hope. Love of horses and hope that one of them, some day, might win. "There's always that next horse," he says. "The one you're excited about."

He trudges back to the barn where his 11 horses are stabled. He started here as a groom, when he was 15. On the backstretch of Canada's largest and most famous racetrack, located on the northwestern edge of Toronto, there is little glamour, only rubber boots and a lot of manure. The exercise boys and grooms heckle each other in a variety of languages and accents. These are some of the jobs – estimated by the racing industry at 30,000 in Ontario alone – that will be lost if the industry disintegrates.

At the side of the barn, Howard waves to Ken Katyrn, a 30-year-old owner-trainer who's bathing his chestnut filly, Stormy Voyage. "It is tough these days," Katyrn says. When he was 12 he started taking the bus to the track after school to work with his uncle, Abraham, also a trainer. He's thought about moving his small racing operation to New York, but he has not contemplated finding a job that is, if you'll pardon the pun, more stable. "I love it too much," he says. "I love the horses."

On Sunday, with the running of the 154th Queen's Plate at Woodbine, the spotlight will briefly turn to horse racing, a sport that is overlooked for the rest of the year, except for the diehard fans who love it and bettors who can't get their kicks elsewhere. Howard looks up at the grandstand looming behind him. "I saw Secretariat race here," he says. "The stands were full. It was electric."

Oct. 28, 1973. A sleeting, bitter day at Woodbine. The stands were indeed full for the Canadian International Stakes, with women in fur coats and men smoking cigars. In his final race, the incomparable Secretariat pulled away from the field like a jet in the company of biplanes.

When people who love racing get together, this is invariably the way conversation turns: I saw Secretariat run. I saw Seattle Slew, Glorious Song, Zenyatta, Cigar. Once you've been there, you know that nothing compares to the thrill of standing a few yards from a dozen thousand-pound animals straining to get their noses over the finish line.

In the 1930s, Seabiscuit drew a depressed nation together; in the 1960s, Northern Dancer was Canada's darling, and the world's; in the 1970s, Alydar and Affirmed pounded each other like Frazier and Ali in the three races of the U.S. Triple Crown and drew thousands of new fans to racetracks.

The problem is, those fans are gone. If they bet, they're betting on computers at home. If they like sports, they're watching something that provides an hour and a half of continuous thrills, and some half-naked cheerleaders to boot. The fans started leaving in the 1990s and, until recently, racetracks haven't done a great job of getting them back.

On the backstretch of Mohawk Raceway, near Campbellville, Ont., Melissa McKee used to spend her days looking at sore fetlocks and listening to raspy lungs. But now she and other veterinarians who treat Ontario's standardbreds find themselves signing export papers, because the horses are heading out of the province, to race or be bred in the United States.

"It's been devastating," McKee says. "There are so many trainers and breeders that are backing out of the business. ... It trickles down to drivers, grooms, feed companies, blacksmiths, fencing companies. There's a huge ripple effect through the rural economy."

Not to mention the effect on the horses themselves: It's harder to retrain a cart-pulling standardbred than a thoroughbred. There's a standardbred adoption program, and a small market among Mennonites who need driving horses. Some horses, inevitably, meet the worst end. While McKee says she would never euthanize a horse simply because it was unwanted, "frankly, I think a lot of them get sent to Kitchener [Ont.], which is a clearing house for horses that get slaughtered or go for meat."

Ontario is where the vast majority of Canada's horse racing and breeding take place. The industry has been kicked around right across the country: Hastings Park in Vancouver, a thoroughbred track, recently cancelled two days of racing because it didn't have enough horses to fill the card. The industry in Quebec, almost exclusively harness racing, collapsed in 2009, and is only now showing signs of life with the reopening of the Hippodrome Trois-Rivières. But it is undoubtedly the 17 racetracks in Ontario that suffered the most when the horse-racing business was artificially inflated, then punctured, by millions of dollars in slot-machine cash.

The marriage of one-armed bandits and four-legged athletes, which the Ontario government introduced to bolster its coffers in 1998, was successful beyond anyone's

dreams. The infusion of revenue from slots meant that the racing industry increased by 50 per cent in size, according to Ontario's Horse Racing Industry Transition Panel. Purses in harness racing soared from \$81-million in 1998, to \$189-million in 2002; for thoroughbreds, they rose from \$45-million to \$112-million. Ontario tracks became among the most bountiful in North America. Breeding of horses soared. New investors flooded the industry, many of whom perhaps shouldn't have been there.

"The success almost became like crack cocaine," says Dennis Mills, the former Liberal MP who now runs Racing Future, an outfit that aims to attract new fans to the sport. The problem was, in the gold rush, little of the gold was invested in marketing horse racing, or devising innovative new betting strategies to attract the sporting crowd.

Then, suddenly and without warning, the Ontario government cancelled the slots at racetracks program in March of 2012, effectively pulling millions of dollars out of the racing infrastructure. "They cut the industry's throat," McKee says. Horse people reacted with outrage: Woodbine Entertainment Group, the not-for-profit company that runs Woodbine and Mohawk, suggested the Queen's Plate might cease to exist (this, clearly, has not happened).

Ontario's new premier, Kathleen Wynne, has moved in to calm a skittish industry. She promised interim funding for some tracks, and listened to complaints of a business that says it pumps \$2-billion into the province every year. A draft report of the transition panel, released last week, recommended provincial funding be tied to the amount of wagering at a track – in other words, those that attract more customers will see more of the public coin. It also recommended shrinking the number of harness tracks to five.

Wynne entered the lion's den – or the stallion's stall – when she showed up at Mohawk Raceway on the night of the \$1-million North America Cup and braved the catcalls of the crowd: "I want us to have a strong horse-racing industry in Ontario, and I am going to do everything in my power to have a horse-racing industry that's strong for years and years to come." The catcalls turned, reluctantly, to cheers.

Everyone wants to breathe life back into racing – well, everyone except People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals – but no one is sure how to do it. The problems sometimes seem insurmountable. There hasn't been a horse that's fired the public imagination since Zenyatta retired in 2010. When horse racing does capture the public eye, it's often because something terrible occurred: Barbaro breaking down in the Preakness Stakes, his jockey, Edgar Prado, struggling to hold up the three-legged horse; Eight Belles having to be euthanized in front of a horrified Kentucky Derby crowd after breaking both front legs.

When prospective superhorses do come along, they often turn out to have hooves of clay. I'll Have Another and his Vancouver-based jockey, Mario Gutierrez, briefly sparked adoration last year by winning the first two races of the U.S. Triple Crown, until it was revealed that the horse had dodgy legs, which his trainer was patching up with painkillers.

Doping and running unfit horses is much more of an American problem than a Canadian or European one, as a sweeping New York Times investigation pointed out last year (The Times singled out Woodbine for its good safety record). In Britain, where major horse races regularly sell out and attract a young, champagne-swilling, mini-skirted crowd, medication is strictly controlled. In a bid to make the sport seem gentler, new restrictions were recently introduced to limit the number of times a jockey can hit a horse with the whip.

But England has Ascot and Frankel, the undefeated wonder horse, who recently retired and now is happily ensconced at a stud farm. Britain's Jockey Club just released its first Sporting Bond, and raised \$40-million to rebuild Cheltenham racecourse, almost doubling what it had anticipated. Australia has the festival atmosphere of the Melbourne Cup and its great champion, Black Caviar, who is a national hero.

Can Canada and the United States compete?

Well, it is an industry that runs on hope. "There has to be a universal commitment by the entire sport of horse racing to rebuilding the fan base," says Dennis Mills, of Racing Future. "The fan has been ignored for 30 years." Mills, who owns several thoroughbreds, would like to see an integrated gambling strategy that brings horse racing into its fold and includes different types of wagering, and an investment in technology at tracks – high-definition broadcasting and lightweight cameras that sit on jockeys' helmets. Perhaps a dating service for people who love the sport. "If Christian Mingle can do it, why can't we?"

Across North America, racetracks are throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks. The venerable Kentucky track Keeneland gives out college scholarships. At Santa Anita in Los Angeles, you can hear the California Philharmonic play a symphony in the infield. At Gulfstream in Miami, kids go to summer camp to learn "horse care and hip hop." Pimlico hosts evenings devoted to Maryland wines.

In Canada, too, racetracks are hosting family nights, offering betting tutorials, giving away tours of the backstretch. There is much more to be done, and even then there will probably never be a return to the days of Northern Dancer, who drew thousands to Woodbine when he won the Queen's Plate in 1964 and, in the words of Toronto's mayor, "Never has the imagination of the nation been captured in such a way." There is too much competition for people's attention. Horse racing's curse is that it is both too fast and too slow.

"I just don't think it's realistic that we'll fill the stands the way we did 20 years ago," says Sue Leslie of the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association. "But do we have to work on it? Absolutely. Did we as an industry not put the emphasis on it that we should have? Yes, that's probably true. And we've learned a lesson."

Partly, that lesson involves being more family-friendly, and providing entertainment for the 20 minutes between races. But really, it's already an unbeatable day out. On a recent Saturday at Woodbine, parents pushed children in strollers past grizzled old railhounds bent over their Racing Forms. The kids reached out as the horses, leggy and magnificent, were led to the walking ring between races. Children and the elderly understand the magic of the horse: It's just everyone in between who's forgotten.

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