

# BREEDERS' CUP PRESENTS FRESH FACES: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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by Natalie Voss | September 3, 2014 1:05 pm

*Patrick Cummings is the director of racing information for Trakus, where he has worked since 2011. He is also the founder/editor of DubaiRaceNight.com, which he launched in 2007. Cummings holds a Bachelor of Arts in political science from Dickinson College and a masters in business administration from Baylor University. He has previously called the races at Philadelphia Park and Manor Downs and has interned for The Racing Network and the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame. He is also the North American correspondent for Al Adiyat.*

## **How and why did you begin your career in the sport of racing?**

Racing has been a passion for as long as I can remember, and it is stronger than ever. I was captivated by the numbers and strategy as a child, mostly through television and a few passing visits to Philadelphia Park (now Parx). My first role was as a summer intern in the Parx television department and parlayed that into a role as the substitute announcer. I called races from 1999 to 2009 during weekends and vacation time while I was otherwise full-time in the financial services industry.

Seven years removed from my undergraduate work, I left the investment field and pursued my MBA (Baylor University '11), focusing all my efforts on how I could combine business and my passion for racing. Trakus has been a great place to do that as our operation is basically 24-7 around the world.

## **What was it about Dubai's program that captivated you enough to start Dubai Race Night?**

It was a combination of fascination and opportunity. It made little sense that all this money was funneled into the Carnival, quality horses were being shipped from all over the world for a few months, and there was little Internet coverage beyond the official site of the Dubai Racing Club. If you want to get into something, you just have to pick a time to start and go from there. Dive in. The Carnival and subsequent World Cup meetings are spectacles and feature horses from six continents, making it incredibly fun to follow, handicap, and bet.

## **How has your experience with international racing changed the way you look at the sport in this country?**

One simply cannot always think that the way "we" do something is the best way, the only way, or the right way. I've been incredibly blessed to experience some of the biggest race days on the planet and seen things from many different perspectives.

In South Africa, I can put a pick six together, walk up to the tote windows, hand in a ticket with my combinations and tell them how much I want to spend. 500 rand (about \$46)? It could be a combination that traditionally, based on the American model, costs \$72, but I'll get a fractional investment. I like the basic ideology behind that structure.

I am fascinated by the concept of the jockey challenge bet in Hong Kong, and really am hopeful some high minimum derivative can take hold in America. My hypothesis is that it could be extraordinarily popular with newcomers.

## **What can American racing learn from the way the sport is conducted elsewhere?**

Overall, American racing takes its punches from the rest of the global racing community, especially recently. Sometimes it is deserved, but only sometimes. The day-to-day operations of American racing are reliant on wagering, so I'll keep my focus there for this answer. There are a few things we do very well.

Organized racing information is superb and readily available from multiple channels. Go to France or the UK and try to find an organized past performance product – good luck. The U.S. has timed races longer than any other jurisdiction on the planet – there might be a few issues with how we do it (we REALLY need to get rid of run-up in this modern era) – but some players in other jurisdictions jump through hoops to get even the most basic sectional time data. On a macro level, the pari-mutuel tote method continues to fund racing in a logical, sustainable fashion, even if fixed-odds betting could offer some valuable opportunities, especially for discerning players.

While our means of entering bets (via ADWs, self-service terminals) have developed with technology, the back-end side of presenting information back to the bettor is sorely lacking. It's absolutely bewildering that the industry is fine with providing bettors only the most basic insight as to what their bets could return (win odds, exacta and double will-pays). Otherwise, you are just guessing. I've said this before – greater access to information yields greater market efficiencies which encourages participation. If I know that one particular trifecta combination is paying way more than I think it should, based on my analysis, I would bet more. There are many ways to be frustrated in racing, but being upset by a lower-than-expected payout should not be one of them.

### **Why do you think racing has been such a fan-supported sport in other places (Hong Kong especially, since I know you spend some time there), and less so here?**

Hong Kong is a fantastic place, but there isn't much in the way of large scale public events. In other words, their market for professional sport is fairly undersupplied (space limitations, mostly). Their 80+ days of racing are almost like the 81 home games a Major League Baseball team would have.

Many people point to Hong Kong racing and suggest that it is such an outlier and so successful that one couldn't really use it as a measure. I'd disagree. It's easily forgotten that the HKJC saw total handle decline, dramatically, and overcame it. According to numbers presented at the 2014 Asian Racing Conference, from the beginning of their 2000-2001 season to the end of the 2005-2006 campaign, handle was down 26 percent. U.S. handle has declined about that much over a period nearly twice as long (and was actually up slightly during the period in question in HK). The HKJC acted on many different levels (handle is up 70 percent since that 2005-2006 low, and up 25 percent from the start of the decline in 2000).

Could American racing take a few snippets from what HK has done and repackage it for the local audience? I believe so. The same would apply to other great experiences I've had elsewhere.

What frustrates me on occasion are the complaints about some of American racing's attempts to diversify the fan experience. There is a big difference between the short-term impact of one fairly minute metric (say, amount of beer sold in concert areas on Preakness day compared to wagering there) and the long-term impact of that 22-year-old having a great time at Pimlico and coming back twice a year over the next five years, then four times a year a few years later, opening an ADW account eventually, owning a share in a partnership, etc. It is organic, and it takes a long time for the "racing bettor" crop to grow.

I personally believe America's Best Racing is doing a phenomenal job at this (full disclosure, I write a periodic blog there for Trakus). Seeing the forest from the trees isn't always easy on the surface. They offer a wide range of content to many varied tastes. They bring bloggers from different backgrounds to the races (I met a few last weekend at Saratoga), people with a regular online reach in the hundreds or thousands, and show them a great time. These influencers then share their experience with their followers. Is this going to raise handle and "save" the industry or stop the slide in the very short term? Unlikely. Is it a very 21<sup>st</sup> century way of bolstering the sport's fan base for 10, 20, 30 years down the road? I think so.

### **What do you think your generation brings to the sport that's perhaps a bit different from those before?**


Qualitatively, many in my generation working in racing are there because they want to be there, and I think that is a massive benefit to the sport going forward. On a more specific level, we recognize the power and importance of leveraging technology and data, something that I believe is

seriously lacking at most levels of racing, and that includes the training of horses.

On another note, I believe this is the best time to be a racing fan in the history of the sport. All you need is an internet connection and you can pretty much learn, watch, listen, and engage in any facet of the industry. There was a recent piece by Steve Haskin that lamented the loss of the many great racing writers, the "Ghosts of the Press Box." While sad to lose that phenomenal talent, I couldn't help but think that the only people who were really enjoying their legendary writing were those in their home communities. While we obviously have fewer covering the sport now, even the curious, introductory race fan can have that curiosity fulfilled in a massive way.

Have a question for a Kentucky Derby winning trainer like Graham Motion? Ask him on Twitter. Want to see the lifetime charts of some random horse from 12 years ago that your grandfather owned? Go to Equibase.com. Want to watch American-trained Hootenanny run in the Prix Morny from Deauville? Don't have access to the live video from France? The replay is on Youtube ten minutes after the race – with the link provided on Twitter (of course). Want to see what the Arima Kinen is all about, and be amazed by a big Japanese classic? Watch it live on TVG in the middle of the night.

That is incredible access for current and future fans. It might seem dark now, and there may be some structural changes to various jurisdictions, including a reduction of days in the U.S. to get supply and demand back in balance, but I firmly believe the future is much brighter than many realize.

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**Source URL:** <http://www.paulickreport.com/features/breeders-cup-presents-fresh-faces/an-international-perspective/>

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