

On the BIG Stage

Mike Newlin brings
new attitude to
New Meadowlands

BY NICOLE KRAFT

A lot of factors make Mike Newlin a less-than-obvious choice to be general manager of the New Meadowlands Racetrack.

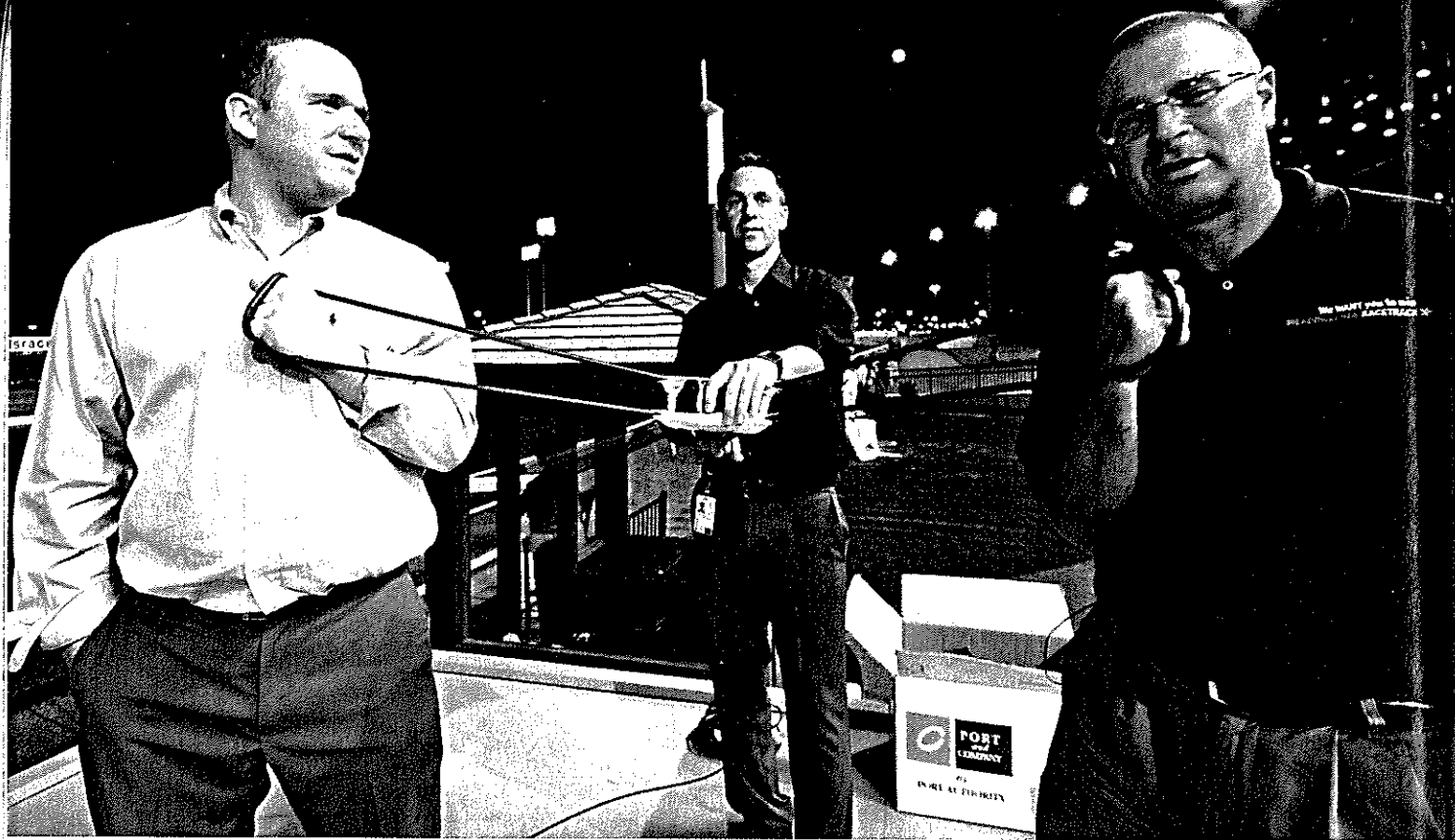
For one thing, he has seen far more greyhounds chasing mechanical rabbits than he has Standardbreds in harness.

Before taking the Meadowlands job, he had never before set foot in New Jersey.

And the only horses he saw go round and round in his previous job were on a carousel, as he was most recently general manager of a zoo.

But Newlin believes in harness racing and, even more importantly, he believes in Jeff Gural's vision for the sport,





WORKING THE CROWD: Clockwise from above: Mike Newlin slings T-shirts into the crowd as part of his hands-on promotional efforts. • Newlin made a trip to the track extra special for a young visitor by taking him to meet a horse and giving him a T-shirt. • Meadowlands Racetrack even scheduled a camel race—in which Newlin gleefully participated.

and that is what brought him east to take over duties at arguably the sport's most influential track, trying to find its place among gaming's ever-changing landscape.

"Racing today is at a crossroads," he said. "If we don't fix our game, there will be more and more tracks falling by the wayside. We have a lot of work to do. But Jeff is on the right path, and it's a path I want to be on with him."

Newlin is part of the New Meadowlands, a reflection and manifestation of Jeff Gural's commitment to a sport that just a year ago was on the brink of disappearing from the Garden State it had ruled.

Gone are the days of 35,000-person crowds and cards filled with million-dollar races.

Gone is the state support that kept the coffers full long after racing's appeal in the Garden State began to wane.

Gone, too, is the feeling that if you make it at the Meadowlands, you have truly made it.

Now drivers, trainers and owners flock to points north and south—Yonkers

Raceway and Harrah's Philadelphia, specifically—to make a grab for the most lucrative races and leave the Meadowlands like so many other racing facilities scrambling for horses, striving to maintain a bettable product, hoping the future looks brighter than the present.

And standing in the middle of this crossroads is Newlin, who took a most circuitous route to one of the sport's most high-profile positions.

A native of Omaha, Neb., Newlin started in his work life in 1986 as a mutuel clerk at Bluffs Run Dog Track in Iowa, while in college at Creighton University, but after school left the Midwest for what he called the "racing sanctuary" of Florida.

There he spent three years overseeing mutuels at the Jacksonville, Orange Park and St. Johns kennel clubs.

As more and more tracks sought slots, however, he knew he needed casino experience to be marketable. That led him to move back to Omaha's riverboat casinos and later to Ameristar Casino, where he served as assistant cage manager.

The dogs came calling again in August 1997 with the job as mutuel director for the Palm Beach Kennel Club and Poker Room in Florida, but by February 2001, Newlin was ready to head home again, and brought his experience to Canterbury Park Racetrack and Casino in Minnesota, where he was the director of mutuel operations.

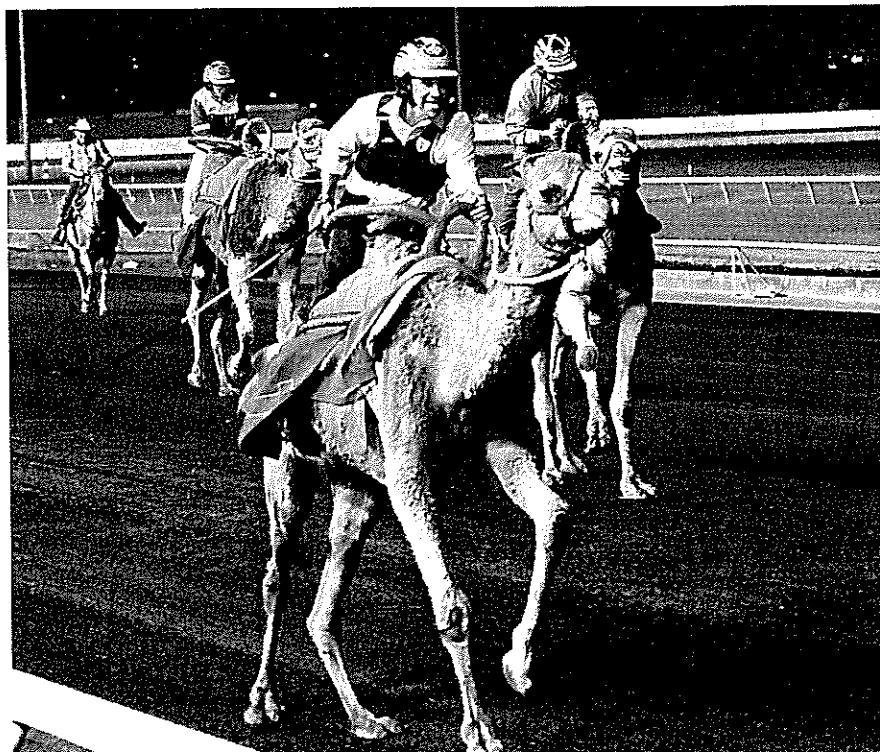
"A racetrack is a racetrack," said Newlin about moving between species. "And it doesn't matter if you come from the front side or the backside. Racing becomes part of you when it becomes your livelihood."

After six years at Canterbury, he made the leap to general manager at the Nebraska State Fair, where he oversaw a 24-percent increase in attendance and a



“I told my executive staff here, ‘Handle every live racing day like you are having a **party in your backyard**. Make the food good, and make sure people are having fun.’”

—MIKE NEWLIN



17-percent bump in bets on live racing.

But in 2010, when the Nebraska fair was forced to relocate, Newlin decided to as well—all the way out of racing. He ended up at Minneapolis’ Como Park Zoo and Como Town Amusement to serve as general manager.

Newlin might still be there today if not for a call from USTA Executive Vice President and CEO Mike Tanner, who, as director of marketing, media and simulcasting at Gulfstream Park, came to Canterbury a decade ago to talk corporate sponsorships and mutuels.

“Mike called me out of the blue [last] July or August and said, ‘I’m not sure if you are interested in getting back into racing, but you should check into this,’” Newlin recalled. “I had been out of the business a couple of years. But he told

ON THE JOB: Top: Newlin prepares the car that fans can enter to win by tossing rubber horses through its window as it drives down the stretch. Middle: Talking to fans with Jeff Gural, who resurrected the Meadowlands and hired Newlin. Bottom: Newlin is constantly working to give fans a great time at the track.

me about Jeff and what was happening at the Meadowlands. I had never even been to New Jersey or New York City. But when I came to meet with Jeff, and I came to the Meadowlands and walked around, I was astonished by how big and great condition the facility was in.

“Once you get away from racing, you miss it a lot. But I knew I wanted to be back at the right place at the right time with the right owner. Jeff and I have very similar perspectives on how the business got to the condition it’s in and where the industry needs to change to survive long-term.”

Gural, who has never shied from trying new things to help racing, acknowledged that Newlin was not a logical choice to lead what has been racing’s premier venue for 40 years. But he was sold on two major traits Newlin brought to the interview table: enthusiasm and a willingness to play the game Gural’s way.

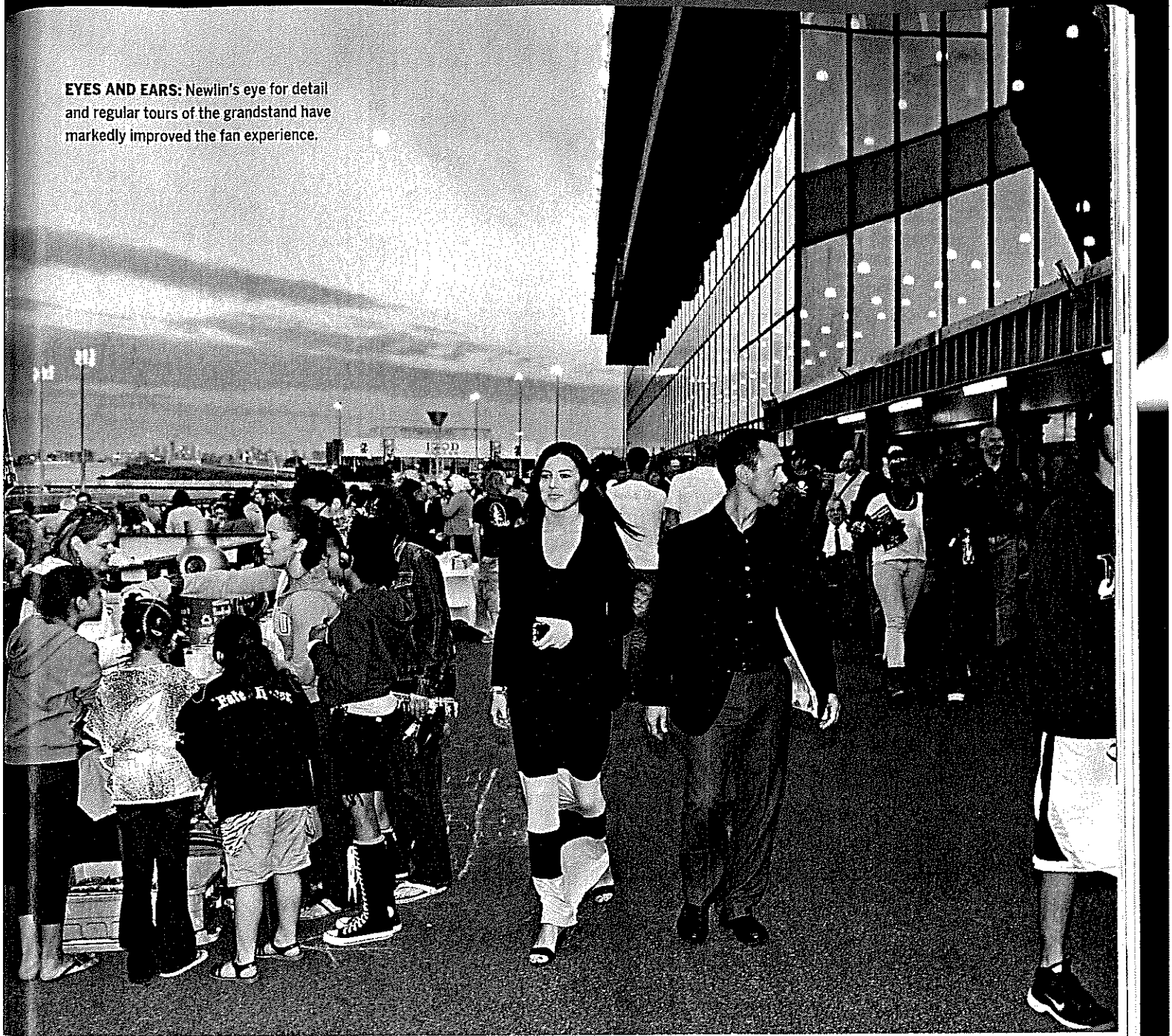
“I know he was an off-the-wall pick, not having the experience and coming from a fair track,” Gural said. “But he was enthusiastic about racing, and that was what I needed. He was someone who would walk the floor, know the customers. And he would implement the policy that I was going to come up with, as opposed to someone who has been an executive in racing all his life, and just sits in an office.

“I know he looks like a fish out of water. But he does walk around and is enthusiastic about what we are trying to do.”

Newlin has already seen results. Live on-track handle was up almost 14 percent in the Meadowlands’ first months of 2012 racing, while attendance was up 7.5 percent. Demolition began in April on the real “New Meadowlands,” a \$90 million, state-of-the-art grandstand to stand where once were barns that housed every great Standardbred, from Rambling Willie and Niatross to Mack Lobell and Moni Maker.



EYES AND EARS: Newlin's eye for detail and regular tours of the grandstand have markedly improved the fan experience.



It is slated to open in January 2014. “How many people would be willing to build a brand-new track in this day and age without assurances they will get additional forms of gaming?” said Newlin. “That takes a lot of guts, and faith in the future of changing this business.”

The mere fact the Meadowlands exists after being shuttled away by the New Jersey government is encouraging to many, but Newlin recognizes that challenges remain great for his track and countless others—especially considering how long the industry has been facing such battles and putting up roadblocks

to its own potential success.

“Most of the problems in racing today are because of poor decisions made 25 years ago by people in power,” he said. “Instead of recreating the game and changing with the times, they looked for easy ways to solve problems. Other sports like NASCAR, when they were on the brink, they revamped their entire business model. It’s totally different than it was in the 1970s. Football is totally different. We are almost the exact same product—the same everything that we were in the 1970s, except for simulcasting and Internet wagering, two things that cause people not to come to the track.”

Newlin, however, does see hope on the horizon—and he sees it in the form of Gural’s vision. From a backside perspective, Newlin supports Gural’s moves to bring integrity to the game by removing those horsemen who are unwilling to play by the medication or racing rules—he recently prevented drivers from creating holes between contenders during the racing mile.

And he believes just as strongly in making the live racing experience something it is at few tracks: fun.

“We have to get younger people coming to the track, and . . . when we get

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USTA District Meeting Dates 2012/2013 Schedule

District 1

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 19, 2013
Place: Columbus Marriott Northwest, Dublin, OH
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Nov. 30, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 1, 2013

District 2

Day/Date: Sat., Nov. 10, 2012
Place: Hazel Park Raceway, Hazel Park, MI
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Sept. 21, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Nov. 6, 2012

District 3

Day/Date: Sun., Jan. 6, 2013
Place: Hilton Arden West, Sacramento, CA
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Nov. 17, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 2, 2013

District 4A

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 12, 2013
Place: Best Western Regency Inn, Marshalltown, IA
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Nov. 23, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 8, 2013

District 4B

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 26, 2013
Place: Howard Johnson, Madison, WI
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Dec. 7, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 22, 2013

District 5

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 19, 2013
Place: Illinois State Fairgrounds, Springfield, IL
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Nov. 30, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 15, 2013

District 6

Day/Date: Sat., Dec. 8, 2012
Place: Isle Casino Racing, Pompano Park, Pompano, FL
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Oct. 19, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Dec. 4, 2012

District 7

To be determined

District 8

Day/Date: Sun., Oct. 28, 2012
Place: Vernon Downs, Vernon, NY
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Sept. 8, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Oct. 24, 2012

District 8A

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 26, 2013
Place: Yonkers Raceway, Yonkers, NY
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Dec. 7, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 22, 2013

District 9

Day/Date: Sat., Jan. 19, 2013
Place: Calumet Club, Augusta, ME
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Nov. 30, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Jan. 15, 2013

District 11

Day/Date: Fri., Oct. 5, 2012
Place: "1776 Steakhouse," Rehoboth Beach, DE
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Aug. 16, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Oct. 1, 2012

District 12

Day/Date: Fri., Oct. 19, 2012
Place: Freehold Raceway, Freehold NJ
*Nominating Petitions Postmark Deadline: Aug. 30, 2012
**Receipt of Ballot Deadline: Oct. 15, 2012

* Article III, Section 6(b) "Nomination for Director shall be made by filing a written petition signed by at least 25 voting members from his district to be filed at the Main Office of the Association at Columbus, Ohio, at least 50 days before the election. Nominating petitions forwarded by mail shall be by registered mail, return receipt requested, and shall be considered filed as of the postmark date. All others shall be considered filed at the time they are actually received at the Main Office of the Association..."

** Article III, Section 6(e) "...the deadline for receipt of ballots... shall be four days prior to the Annual District Meeting."

In accordance with Article III, Section 6(g), the Certified Public Accounting Firm is determined to be Plante & Moran, PLLC, 65 East State Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215.

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them to the track, we have to make that experience a great one," he said. "I told my executive staff here, 'Handle every live racing day like you are having a party in your backyard. Make the food good, and make sure people are having fun.'"

For bettors and fans alike, Newlin wants to make the world's fastest races even faster—by speeding up post times and eliminating the dead air between contests. He strives for no more than 15 minutes from the "official" sign to the next race.

"Why drag the races? When it's post time, it's post time," he said. "The only time we would hold up a race is if we are going to shut out people."

And in a way, Newlin thinks his bold-est move might just create those lines at the windows: The New Meadowlands gives out free programs. To everyone.

It goes back to the simplest of customer service concepts: If you invite someone to your house for a party, it would be helpful to let them know what's going on.

"When we were charged \$2 for a program at a track, I was the only one who bought one," Newlin said. "My wife sat there and had dinner and wine, and then she was ready to go. Now you see couples at the track, both of them have programs, and the wives are betting, too. It may be the prettiest horse or one of their kids' names, but they are betting.

"I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but at least I use common sense. Most tracks don't use common sense. Or they don't care. Maybe they figure no one comes to the live track, so they don't care anyway. But it's a no-brainer to talk to customers. It's a no-brainer to take care of customers."

Another "no-brainer" is the proof that more race dates don't necessarily equate to more successful race meets. Meadowlands Racetrack, which used to run five days a week from January to August, is now down to just 81 dates, primarily on Fridays and Saturdays.

"We had tapped out our regulars, and we took away anything special—opening day and closing day, the glory of the race meet," he said. "We have not been creating a new generation of players. Instead, we were pinching every dime out of our current fan base."

Newlin knows that despite the best of ideas, racing is not an industry that takes

to outsiders readily, and he is trying his best to get to know all the players in a very close-knit game. To that end, when he is not on the floor schmoozing the customers, he walks through the paddock as often as he can to talk to drivers and trainers, and get a sense for what they need from the racing experience.

He is also building relationships with the industry leaders, such as Leo McNamara and Tom Luchento of the Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association of New Jersey, to help horsemen recognize and facilitate the necessary changes to help the sport.

And Luchento is already a Newlin fan, calling him "perfect for what we needed."

"He came into a tough situation, but all the numbers are up," said Luchento. "He came in and right from the beginning took the bull by the horns and changed the way people were treated at the Meadowlands. He is out there every night, walking the building. That is a good change from what has been in the past.

"And he works well with Jeff. Between the two of them, they are doing a very good job for New Jersey."

As the Meadowlands rolls through its first stakes season under new management, the future is certainly brighter than it was a year ago, but Newlin knows that he does not have the luxury of time to turn the facility, and the sport, around.

To that end, he looks to the New Meadowlands to fill the role once held by the old one: to lead the way to change.

If it can find a direction for all to follow, it just might provide the rejuvenation live racing needs.

"We need the Meadowlands, because it's the Meadowlands," he said. "It is the world's greatest harness track, the biggest stage, as far as this sport goes. We don't have slot machines, so we just have to focus on making the racing great. For harness racing to survive long-term, the Meadowlands has to survive.

"Five years from now, we'll either be much better or much worse. And one way or the other, the Meadowlands will set the example."

NICOLE KRAFT is a former *Hoof Beats* executive editor. To comment on this story, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.