

IFHA 45th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Presentation by HOWARD WRIGHT, associate editor, Racing Post (UK)

Future challenges of racing

Mr Chairman, Mr Moderator, ladies and gentlemen.

Now I know what those fellows in Rome felt like, just before they were thrown to the lions. This is a very unusual experience for a journalist, facing a distinguished audience of racing administrators – it's normally my job to ask the questions, not necessarily to supply the answers.

But I suppose I have only myself – and Monsieur Romanet - to blame.

Sixteen years ago I asked Louis if I could attend this annual conference, to cover it for the Racing Post. He said Yes, I turned up and my report appeared.

But it seems my appearance was too much of a shock to the system for an organisation that had been used to operating behind closed doors. The following year, a similar request was turned down, by order of the executive committee, on the grounds that if they let me in, they would have to allow every Tom, Dick and Harry Journalist to attend.

Instead, I met Louis after the conference, discussed what had gone on, and still wrote a report.

Eventually, the executive committee decided to allow a small number of domestic and international media to attend the open session of the conference – very sensibly, in my view, otherwise you would still be meeting in a locked room, and no-one in the outside world would have heard of the IFHA.

A perfect example of how to treat the media – take them into your confidence, treat them like human beings, and you may be surprised at the response. Which is what I want to discuss over the next few minutes.

The title of the session is Future challenges of racing – well, you all know what they are, and how they affect your particular jurisdictions.

I want to dwell on one general area that I know something about, the media, and since, as I said, I am used to posing questions, that is what I will do. I will leave you to consider four questions.

The first: how well do you know members of your local and national media?

If you passed one in the street, would you cross to the other side, or make a point of speaking first?

And I don't mean just the media who turn up on your racecourses every raceday. Do you know the people who produce the media, whether it is print, television, radio or internet? By that I mean the production people, the bosses at the newspaper or television, who decide exactly how much space is given to a particular item. These are powerful people. You should know them.

Which leads me on to the second question: do you know how your local or national media outlets actually work?

What are their schedules, do they set their production and space allocations well in advance of publication or broadcasting, because that seriously affects how and when you should present them with vital information.

Do you bombard racing correspondents with meaningless and therefore wasteful press releases? Do you take note of appropriate timing, and how often do you pass on important news late in the working day.

I took a call from a British racecourse a couple of years ago at 7.45 in the evening, telling me they had abandoned the following day's race meeting, and asking me to alert the Racing Post.

7.45 in the evening – in the middle of my favourite television programme, but also when it was dark outside. For some reason the racecourse had held off deciding to tell the press about a decision that had been made earlier in the afternoon, but it was far too late to prevent the Racing Post from wasting eight pages of editorial, and other newspapers being extremely upset when they realised they could have used the space for another story about Wayne Rooney or Arsene Wenger – people that really matter to sports editors who have no great interest in horseracing.

In that instance, the ignorance of people who should have known better would not have affected the new media channels – internet, for instance, which all newspapers and TV stations use extensively nowadays. There, they would simply have pressed a button or two and the following day's racecard would have been history.

But that takes me on to the third question: are you using new media to best effect?

Is the news on your website up to the minute; could it be faster, more informative, therefore more likely to bring people to your site? Does the same apply to your Facebook and Twitter accounts? Do you have Facebook and Twitter accounts?

Like it or not – and even I, as a fully paid-up member of the old school, have come to accept it – Twitter is overtaking the internet as the fastest source of information. In fact, I would be surprised if there wasn't someone in the room at this very moment quietly picking up information on a smartphone. I won't take that as a reflection of lack of interest in what I have to say, simply that it's a way of the world in the new, multi-tasking era.

Twitter has become a particularly powerful tool in the journalist's kitbag. Let me give you an example.

A fortnight ago, one of Britain's best-known trainers, Ginger McCain, died. The Racing Post got to know first, and put out the news on its Twitter feed at 8.30 in the morning.

Bear in mind that many readers of the print edition were only just catching up with that day's edition, which, of course, covered the previous day's news.

Yet within half an hour, other news sources and journalists had picked up on McCain's death, and were feeding their own outlets. And as the day wore on, internet appreciations were published, and people within racing, professionals and public, added their own comments to Twitter, Facebook and websites.

By the time the Racing Post appeared the following day, I cannot imagine that anyone with an interest in racing in Britain was unaware of the news.

That is how news spreads these days. And if you are not ahead of the game, you are going to be left far behind.

And that does not just apply to local or national appreciation of your activities. The internet, Twitter and Facebook do not recognise national boundaries.

Which brings me to my fourth question: how much attention do you pay to international media?

I have a top ten of international racing authorities and racecourses; those countries and places that stand out for treatment of overseas media. I am happy to share the list with you – for a fee, of course. After all, we are in a competitive, commercial world.

I will, though, give a clue – subsidised air fares and accommodation alone are not enough; access and information at the point of arrival is just as likely to create a good impression, and encourage all-important coverage.

But nor is contact once or twice a year, for big festivals, a guarantee of lasting coverage. It has to be consistent.

So there we are – four questions, and a few supplementaries, to sum up the future challenges as far as the media is concerned.

But if there is one point I can leave you with, it is this: poorly treated, or simply ignored, the men and women of the media can make powerful enemies. Treated properly, however, they can make faithful friends.

Trust me – I'm a journalist.