

INSIDE TRACK



Latest news from the
Association of Irish Racecourses

Tracks working together for the benefit of everyone

Paul Hensey, chief executive of the Association of Irish Racecourses, looks back at the work done during his first 17 months in the job and the challenges ahead

► John O’Riordan

HAVING been appointed to the role of chief executive of the Association of Irish Racecourses (AIR) in January 2023, former Curragh Racecourse manager Paul Hensey faced a number of important challenges in those early months.

“Obviously, I had to hit the ground running, as it was a very busy time for the association”, he said. “I was fortunate, in that my predecessor Paddy Walsh was still *in situ*, so I had the opportunity to work closely with him initially.”

The first big task awaiting Hensey was the completion of the new media rights deal. “The process was well underway, and at a crucial stage, when I came in. A number of racecourses had individual issues and concerns, so we had to work closely with everybody to find solutions

to these issues”, he said.

“Media rights are at a delicate stage internationally at the moment and we are going into uncharted waters, in moving to a performance-based model and away from the streaming/licensed betting office model that we had previously. For that very reason, it was important that we stuck together. I firmly believe that our media rights are far more valuable when offered as one unit. Only time will tell how good a deal it will be for Irish racing but all aspects of this industry are intrinsically linked and a good media rights deal is a crucial cog in that wheel.”

Aside from the aforementioned, there is much going on within AIR at present. Hensey elaborated: “We are currently undertaking an overall review of the AIR card system (for racecourse entry). Another big change has seen the Association move offices from its long-term base in Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, to Naas. Being in Kildare and closer to other industry headquarters is a positive and the office is now more accessible for people. The existing racecourse WiFi contract is also due for renewal shortly, so we have been working on those plans. Like many other businesses, racecourses are experiencing a lot of rising costs and the Association has been working to help in this regard whenever possible.”

Gambling Bill

The Gambling Regulation Bill has been an obvious concern for both AIR and industry stakeholders. Hensey said: “At a meeting with Minister Browne late last year, we were given a number of assurances regarding on-course activities.

“The Minister made a clear distinction between sponsorship and advertis-



ing - something that is very important to us. In that regard, bookmakers would still be allowed to have their logos visible around the parade ring and put branded rugs on winners of races that they have sponsored. The Minister also agreed to exempt authorised racecourses from some clauses in the draft bill that were causing concern regarding children on-site, ATMs and location of bars.

“The major issue, of course, is clause 147, the article which prohibits bookmaker advertising on television between 5.30am and 9pm. Racing TV has questioned the viability of continuing to operate in Ireland if that ban is introduced, so that is a huge concern as our product needs exposure to keep Irish racing to the fore internationally and to protect the 30,000 rural jobs that our industry supports.”

There have a good few racecourse personnel changes over the last six months



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with Michael Lynch appointed manager at Limerick, Ruth Morrison at Downpatrick and Aidan McGarry at Naas. Stephen Heffernan has taken over at Kilbeggan, following the sad passing of Paddy Dunican, which left his AIR colleagues stunned.

“It was a big shock to us all, as we had been with Paddy at the Association AGM at the Keadeen Hotel the previous Thursday,” Hensey said. “He served two terms on the board and a further two as vice-chairman of AIR. I served on the board with Paddy and knew him over 30 years.

“I can’t say we were always on the same side about everything but I always respected his opinion. The facilities and standard of racing improved dramatically at Kilbeggan during his tenure; it was great to see so many people coming together to help Kilbeggan to get back racing again last Friday and to continue Paddy’s good work.”

Racecourses tuned into environmental issues

Racecourses are engaged in Horse Racing Ireland’s Sustainability Strategy, reports Michael Sadlier

VICTOR Quinlan, Head of Environmental Sustainability at Horse Racing Ireland (HRI), recently delivered a presentation on sustainability to members of the Association of Irish Racecourses. The presentation primarily covered environmental and social sustainability.

Environmental sustainability within Irish racing, specifically at Irish racecourses, focuses primarily on biodiversity on the racecourses, energy consumption, and waste management, Victor says. He noted that attendees recognised the potential advantages that environmental sustainability can bring.

Victor defined social sustainability as making positive impacts on the lives of people,

both in the industry and engaging new audiences. “Initiatives like HRI Juniors, which bring students from local schools to visit racecourses and introduce them to racing, are crucial to engage local communities,” he explained.

“Each racetrack has different needs,” Victor noted. Dundalk, for example, is the only track under floodlights. “Dundalk is putting massive efforts into energy efficiency,” he noted. “But if you can’t measure your usage, you can’t reduce it.”

Dundalk Racecourse and DKIT (Dundalk Institute of Technology) are collaborating in a series of studies including evaluating the environmental and economic advantages of transitioning from sodium floodlights to LED floodlights and the project’s viability in terms of the payback period versus focusing on emission reduction.

As Victor said, “HRI tracks are doing similar studies to learn what projects will be impactful, while others might have long payback periods relative to their CO2 savings. We can’t rectify all of our environmental issues overnight, but studies of this nature are useful learnings which will promote sustainable practices across all racecourses in Ireland.”

From a biodiversity perspective, the One Hundred Million Trees project was completed recently at both Limerick and Fairyhouse racecourses. “The best thing about this project is that it has apparent short-, medium-, and long-term benefits. Initially, the land is reclaimed scrubland and, within a couple of years, a biodiversity habitat will be created. With time, previously marginal areas of land will become carbon sinks.”

Waste management is a critical aspect of the industry’s sustainability efforts, and racecourses are actively working to reduce their environmental footprint, particularly regarding single-use plastics. “We have had to challenge suppliers to provide alternatives to plastic cutlery and polystyrene packaging, as we aim to eliminate these materials from our supply chain. ‘If you don’t bring it in, you don’t have to throw it out.’

Racecourses in general have recognised the importance of public awareness and participation. Engaging patrons in proper waste disposal on racedays is a major challenge. Transitioning to sustainable waste disposal practices at racecourses requires collective effort. “By educating and involving racegoers, HRI hopes to overcome this challenge and

create a culture of responsible waste management throughout the racing community.”

Some of the larger racecourses are exploring on-site composting, a move that would significantly reduce organic waste. Another possibility being explored by the industry is the use of HVO (Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil), which serves as a diesel replacement. Victor explained that “HVO takes waste oil products and utilises them in large diesel engines. The use of HVO leads to a 90% reduction in carbon emissions compared to the use of regular agri-diesel.”

After speaking with Victor, it is clear that tracks are dedicated to fulfilling the objectives outlined in its Sustainable Strategy. Racecourses nationwide are actively contributing to securing a sustainable future for the industry and, with support from local communities and funding bodies such as the SEAI, these objectives appear achievable.

Efforts from both racecourse and local communities are essential for realising these sustainability goals. By working hand in hand, racecourses can implement effective measures and foster a culture of environmental and social responsibility within the industry.

The true cost of a cancelled racemeeting

Johnny Ward spoke to the managers of two racecourses which have lost several fixtures already this year due to the weather

► Johnny Ward

THE shocking changes to the Irish climate are taking an alarming toll on racecourses, with those in the south hit especially hard.

Last week’s cancellation at Gowran Park brought the number of inspections at racecourses this year to 34, with 18 fixtures called off and Naas memorably abandoned due to fog on its big day in January.

This winter, a hurling clash between Limerick and Cork was called off three times – for fog then ice and finally rain. Racing was never going to be exempt and, already, Clonmel Racecourse boss D.J. Histon is planning around a ‘new normal’.

He said: “Clonmel has suffered two lost meetings in the first quarter of 2024, a situation not experienced for many years, if ever. While our fixture allocation is relatively certain on a yearly basis, it is proving extremely uncertain that we can hit our allocated dates at certain times of the year, given the recent incessant downpours that continue to play havoc with our racing calendar.

“The frequency of interruption to our racing calendar is something of a new phenomenon, and one that we all have to adjust to. As this new weather pattern appears to be the new norm, rather than grumbling about it, we have to adapt and come up with ways of dealing with it at track level and at an industry strategic level.

“What may appear like an innocuous decision has serious ramifications for all concerned with that fixture: the ground staff have worked tirelessly to

present a safe racecourse on a dedicated stretch of the course that was mapped out weeks in advance. When a meeting is cancelled, a lot of the costs are sunk before the decision to postpone or abandon is made, with little or no chance of recouping those losses. There is a big machine associated with any race meeting, regardless of the track size or its overall status, as everything is relative.”

Lost revenue

Racecourses get one chance to reschedule a meeting and that must be within four weeks. Rescheduling ensures lost revenue; a failure to run the meeting, even allowing for a sizable payout in insurance, is understood to cost a racecourse a serious four-figure sum.

Eddie Scally is Gowran Park manager and has been helping out at Wexford this year. Wexford’s first three scheduled meets this year were called off, with Gowran having three cancelled too.

Scally said: “At Wexford, we lost the St Patrick’s Day fixture. A rescheduling of that is clearly not going to be as good but what was worse was we lost the meeting altogether. We were in a good place before we got a deluge of rain two days before the scheduled refixture.

“You’re leaving it until the last minute too so a lot of your bills are already done, basically racecards, advertising, marketing, live pictures.

“The other thing is the rescheduling has to suit the race programme so last week’s Gowran Wednesday evening meeting has now been moved to a day meeting on a Monday when, obviously, it would be very difficult to attract a



crowd.

“Finally, and it is rarely discussed: the strain on everyone losing the fixture, be it clerk of the course, track foreman, the manager, you are building yourself up for an event lost at the last minute. It can crucify you. My catering company does several racetracks and they have had a wretched time with race meetings lost.”

Many places across the country saw their wettest March on record this year. Histon, like Scally, is worried about the present and future. “While there are

provisions for track compensation, it is not possible to recover all losses suffered. Tracks are burdened with the inherent risk of a business model that is weather dependent which largely rests outside your control,” he added.

“It is difficult to talk about the loss of meetings within the vacuum of a racecourse, given so many are equally impacted. Perhaps we must now revisit the current structures in dealing with lost meetings as it appears it is now part of the norm rather than an infrequent occurrence.”

Gowran Park (pictured), Clonmel and Wexford have all lost multiple meetings already this year \ Healy Racing

News from around the racecourses

Free admission at Gowran Park on Monday

THERE is free admission for all at Gowran Park on Monday, June 3rd, which is a bank holiday. The gate is being sponsored by the Irish National Professional Bookmakers Association.

Billed as the South East’s richest ever raceday, the card features the first running of the €200,000 Irish EBF Gowran Classic and there will be plenty of family-friendly fun too. Go online and download your free ticket now. Visit: gowranpark.ie

Ballinrobe season well under way

BALLINROBE staged a two-day meeting this week and their next fixture is Ladies Day on Monday, June 24th, generously sponsored once again by The Lodge at Ashford Castle.

Further ahead, watch out for the two-day July Festival (July 22nd-23rd) which ties in with festivities in the town.

There are two popular Monday evening meetings on August 12th and 26th, while Friday, September 13th, will close out the season on a high note. Visit: ballinroberacecourse.ie

New manager at Naas

AIDAN McGarry is the new general manager of Naas Racecourse. He starts in the new job on June 20th, just a few days before Naas stages the Listed Al’Shiraa Racing Irish EBF Oaks Trial on Wednesday, June 26th. Aidan has managed Navan Racecourse for the past three years, during which time he oversaw the introduction of the Navan Racing Festival in November. From Naas himself, Aidan previously held roles in Horse Racing Ireland and Irish Thoroughbred Marketing. Visit: naasracecourse.ie

BoyleSports backing Down Royal

BOYLESPORTS will again sponsor this year’s Summer Festival of Racing at Down Royal on June 21st and 22nd. Ireland’s largest independent bookmaker will have its name attached to both the Ulster Derby (premier handicap) and the Ulster Oaks on the 22nd. Emma Meehan, CEO of Down Royal, said: “Maintaining relationships like these are key to ensuring our industry continues to flourish and we are grateful to BoyleSports for their commitment to racing.” Visit: downroyal.com



Downpatrick Racecourse officials were recently joined by members of the Down Royal Corporation of Horsebreeders and Victor Quinlan from Horse Racing Ireland to officially open a new stableyard extension