



Photo by OutTakes Photography

DOUG MCCALLUM LAST MAN STANDING

A wily political animal, Harness Racing BC head honcho Doug McCallum is in the toughest fight of his life to keep the game alive in British Columbia. By Harold Howe

Doug McCallum is nobody's fool and he does not casually offer a solution to the woes of harness racing in British Columbia.

The CEO of Harness Racing BC would like to see the management end of harness racing become a not-for-profit entity. That would mean Great Canadian Gaming, which operates Fraser Downs, would be out of the picture and the racing industry would live or die by its own hand.

The current race meet at Fraser Downs concludes on April 15 with no live racing in the province scheduled again until October. It is an unacceptable situation for the horse racing community which can accept 82 days of racing but not with the long hiatus.

Spread over 10 months with a twice a week schedule, is a far more acceptable solution as far as the horse people are concerned. They have spoken out about their concerns in various media outlets some of which may be viewed by [clicking here](#).

But that schedule does not suit Great Canadian Gaming or provincial regulators. And being a former politician himself, McCallum is discouraged.

"If we continue with a shortened season

next year, our breeding industry will be wiped out along with thousands of jobs," he declares.

As with its holdings in Ontario (Flamboro Downs and Georgian Downs), Great Canadian Gaming has made little attempt to mask its disdain for horse racing. It's a publicly traded gaming company pure and simple with a total focus to the bottom line.

"I'm not one to criticize corporations but they are driven to give a return to investors with a focus on efficiencies and reduction of employees. It is about profit but horse racing is in competition with their gaming operations with the amount of dollars that go to the government," he explains.

"If the racing side was run by a not-for-profit management group it would be operated on behalf of the horse people. Truthfully, I think the government would be a lot more satisfied with that type of scenario too."

He believes it could easily be accomplished at Fraser Downs because the land on which the track sits is owned by the city of Surrey. While Great Canadian Gaming owns the buildings, it simply leases the land.



"I think this is a very realistic idea and quite simple as long as the government approved it. All of us in Canada live in a very tough economy and horse racing, like all industries, needs new ideas and concepts to survive. While this isn't a new idea it is new here and really needs to be looked at."

McCallum, a self-described fiscal conservative believes that Great Canadian Gaming is actually breaking the lease it has with the City Of Surrey. And he should know because he was the man who signed the agreement 12 years ago.

For a period of nine years he served as mayor of the burgeoning west coast city. That is just part of an extensive resume the 66-year-old has cultivated in his lifetime.

"The principle was to be sure that racing ran through the year. We were worried as a council that Great Canadian Gaming was only concerned about its casino license.

"They're doing exactly what we were worried about. I don't know how else to put it other than it's just literally destroying the industry."

McCallum came on board with Harness Racing BC last October after being approached by a director who accurately presented a dire picture of an industry that was sliding down further into an abyss.

Doug McCallum was Mayor of Surrey when the lease between Great Canadian Gaming and the city was signed and he believes the company is not honouring that lease. Having Fraser Downs run by a not for profit entity is the solution to the problems in the province he maintains.

"The board formally approached me and I agreed to do this on a part-time basis. I like to think of myself as someone who tries to improve his community. I've lived all my life in the greater Vancouver area.

"I've been involved with a number of things in my life including a six year period with TransLink, the Greater Vancouver transportation authority," he explains.

"I served three terms as mayor of Surrey which I never planned to do but once involved with local politics and council I was committed. Today Surrey is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada with a population of 500,000.

"The horse industry is important because of the jobs. We calculate it means about 3,500 of them and what some people outside racing don't realize is the financial hit this will mean in our local economy which is already feeling the pinch."

When McCallum came on board his goal was to stabilize the industry this year. Even though it was operating at lesser levels than it would like, the idea was to

bottom out and have a solid foundation involving scheduling, purse monies and government allocation.

"The provincial government supports jobs, every government does. The one here in BC wants us to put together a plan for Standardbred and Thoroughbred racing to operate as a proper business. That led to the creation of provincial management committee in March of 2010.

"Even though the groups had their differences there were some good things that came out of their efforts," he points out.

"But the result for this year was 82 days of racing but with a big hole in the middle of the schedule. That is just not going to work long term."

The whole situation has escalated as the current race meet comes to its end. The association called upon its membership and associated persons to initiate a letter writing campaign in support of the request for a 10 month racing season.

There has also been an effort to draw public attention to the spectacle via local media some of which may be viewed

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DOUG MCCALLUM – LAST MAN STANDING

through the link on page two of this story.

"I have great fears for the breeding industry. If we have that shortened season, the breeding side of the business will be wiped out along with the thousands of jobs. How can we stand by and let that happen?"

On the subject of race dates, McCallum does not buy the long standing argument that Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds can not race at the same time of year.

"It's done elsewhere so why not here? I just don't buy into that and we are working hard to try to diffuse that idea," he says.

"And as far as Sandown Raceway is concerned, it is clear that Great Canadian Gaming does not want us on Vancouver Island. They have a two year lease on the track but nothing is going to happen there."

And what about the talk of a circuit with Alberta?

"It is far better if we all work in our own jurisdictions but we do have to be flexible. There has to be mutual co-operation between the various provinces. We need to strengthen our own position here first so it's not on the radar screen at the moment," he says.

"But when you look at the number of horses already going back and forth between Alberta and BC on their own, it does have some merit to be more formalized."

It would be a cliché to say that McCallum is a man of the people. He tries to regularly walk the barn area to talk to the horse people and he does feel their pain.



"The current six month season at Fraser Downs is forcing me to sell my house in Cloverdale and relocate to Ontario or the United States. I have been in the top three of the driving standings for the last seven years. I also breed one mare a year. Without a longer racing season Fraser Downs is doomed," wrote Jim Marino, one of BC's leading drivers, in a recent letter to the Cloverdale Reporter.

"It just literally makes me sick when you listen to these people tell you how the industry is getting destroyed. And what upsets them the most is that they are not asking for money or more race days, just the same amount of days for over a period of 10 months. It's heartbreaking."

How this is all going to play out is anyone's guess. When McCallum came to the job he told the Harness Racing BC board that he would guarantee "a couple years anyway."

"I am semi-retired with a large family and grandchildren in Hong Kong. My goal is to get harness racing set up in a way that people can have stability and be able to plan. It is a viable industry and to stand by and watch it disappear is not an option."

In his lifetime McCallum has fought some fierce political battles. He's battle hardened but this just might be his toughest fight of all.

"I love the horse people and of course the horses. I don't have any myself but that is not the point. We have to win this race date allocation issue. If we don't it could well be the end." 🐾



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