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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ HAROLD HOWE

QUAKING AGAIN

New Zealanders are attempting to recover from the recent devastating earthquake which struck in late February and has caused numerous concerns in the racing world and far beyond.

Imagine if you will the city of Hamilton, Ontario which has a population of about 350,000. Now try to picture one-third of it virtually destroyed by an earthquake. It seems incomprehensible.

That's what the residents of Christchurch, New Zealand, are trying to come to grips with after a devastating quake with a magnitude of 6.5 on the richter scale struck on February 22. And there will be plenty of ramifications for the harness racing industry in the wake of the disaster.

New Zealand is a small country with just over four million people. Christchurch proper represents approximately 15 per cent of the economy of this Southern Hemisphere nation which encompasses two islands, north and south. Christchurch is on the south island and part of the Canterbury district which has always been regarded as the home of the trotting industry.

As of this writing it is estimated that upwards of 225 people have been killed and bodies are still being recovered. The financial cost of the quake is speculative but a number of \$20 billion has been tossed around by some economists who also

project that economic growth will be carved by 50 per cent.

This all comes after a preliminary quake on September 4 which registered 7.1 but occurred during the night and amazingly resulted in no fatalities. The city did not escape the second bullet though.

For the most part the quake left the harness racing community untouched. Yes, there was a small amount of structural damage to Addington Raceway which is located approximately six kilometres from the center of the quake. Harness Racing New Zealand's aged offices were knocked around but in the big scheme of things it was minimal damage.

But because of the devastation to the city's business district, everything, including racing, is affected. For starters, the Inter Dominion championships had to be moved to Alexandra Park in Auckland. With very little hotel accommodation left, event organizers had no choice but to shift the event.

Losing that carnival planned around the much anticipated series was a huge financial blow to the Metropolitan Trotting Club. While asset rich the club was

already battling a very difficult year in attempting to balance the books. There is no question now that the ledger will be lined with red ink.

With so many businesses destroyed and people out of work it is guaranteed that wagering for the foreseeable future will be noticeably diminished. Unlike Ontario, Pennsylvania, New York and Indiana, horse racing does not ride on the shoulders of gaming machines.

The bet is everything and if people are not working to earn money there will be no wagering. It's anyone's guess as to what the impact will be.

Since September the region has felt a steady parade of aftershocks, well into the hundreds. That will not change and it hardly instills confidence in anyone doing anything including commerce.

The breeding season concluded in January for this country. Service fees are due upon positive pregnancy tests. With the turmoil underway, paying those accounts will hardly be priorities for mare owners. And that means cash flow problems for the stud farms. Realistically, how can anyone be demanding of monies in that climate of turmoil?



Amazingly, the quake hit at 12:50 p.m. in the midst of the second day of the Premier Yearling Sale. Located just six kilometres from the center of the quake, sale attendees felt the rumble but it was nowhere as severe as the city centre.

In fact, the sale action stopped for a mere few moments and carried on not knowing the carnage nearby. The destruction included the primary buildings owned by PGG Wrightson, the company which operates the sale. An undetermined number of people were killed in the destruction of that structure.

While the horses were sold from the previous day's session and that day, the third day of activity was rescheduled to March 17.

Trainers have expressed worry about enthusiasm among owners. One trainer who was unscathed by the quake said so many people in his situation were expressing guilt feelings that no ill-fate came their way unlike their neighbours in the city centre. Is it realistic to think that it will be back to business as usual? Who will be thinking about racing horses when facing this real life drama?

The New Zealanders though are a resilient lot much like their Australian neighbours who dealt with unbelievable flooding conditions in Queensland earlier this year. In both cases, neither country went begging to the international community for assistance to deal with their

Addington Raceway in Christchurch was to have been the host of the upcoming Inter Dominion Series, but structural damage to the facility from the recent earthquake forced the move to Alexandra Park in Auckland.

problems. Instead they accept their lot in life and just get on with it unlike other parts of the world.

Because of the two quakes Addington Raceway has lost a number of days of racing which will not be recouped. With a relatively small population there is only so much gaming that the country can digest. That means lost revenue earning opportunity for owners and trainers again adding to the problems.

The final numbers for the current breeding season have not yet been released. However, anecdotal evidence suggested that the number of mares being bred is down perhaps as much as 15 to 20 per cent which alone is a sobering fact.

And that raises the whole subject of shuttle stallions. This has been such an important component of the North American breeding farms' business plans. One has to wonder if the money will be there for the lease deals for the next breeding season. The farms here are already getting an education in Economics 101 in the present North American breeding season.

The north island was completely unaffected by the quake and at flagship Alexandra Park in Auckland it is business as usual. The Auckland Trotting Club

was generous in agreeing to host the Inter Dominion under the banner of the Metropolitan Club on such short notice.

But Christchurch and the south island is a big source of wagering revenue for Alexandra Park. Given the state of affairs, that stream will be greatly reduced for the foreseeable future.

So while the racing industry carries on as best it can, it is a microcosm of what is happening in Christchurch society at large. Clearly, the tourism industry, which is so important to the region, is dead. Even if there was accommodation in the city who would holiday there at this time?

It is an unimaginable set of conditions that the New Zealanders face. Their idyllic sense of self worth has been shattered leaving them wondering what's next? There will be months of mourning for the dead and attempts to understand what has happened.

Nowhere in the world is there greater appreciation for the trotting horse than in New Zealand. There pride of ownership still matters.

But all that will face challenges like never before in the months ahead. The full measure of the Kiwi heart will be needed. 🏇

MONKEY ON MY WHEEL

p, 2, 1:54.1s – '10 (\$215,000)

Mach Three – Legislation – Presidential Ball



Photo by New Image Media

1. She wears an ear hood that can be pulled off during the race like ear plugs. I'd prefer she wear ear plugs but she really fights them. We're going to practice and see if we can get her to wear them this year.
2. She wears a blind bridle.
3. Her bit is just a plain snaffle with a leather chin strap.
4. I added line poles to her equipment half way through the season as she was bearing in on the turns and out on the straight aways. They seemed to have helped.
5. She wears a medium weight hopple. Last year they were 59 inches and we've got them at 61 now.
6. Her shoes are steel, full swedge all around.
7. She wears a pair of shin boots, just as a precaution.
8. Last year we used Rick's (driver Zeron) Advantage bike on her.

Trainer Travis Umphrey's comments:

"Mac Nichol bought her back as a yearling for \$5,500. I wasn't thrilled when I first saw her to be honest but once we got her around 2:30 I started to be more impressed. She showed quick speed then, she's got a wicked brush.

"We never really left with her last year as she acted like she could get hot. She's ornery, but I like fillies who have some fight in them, it seems to show on the racetrack. I bought a quarter interest in her before she started racing.

"We have her staked pretty extensively this year including the Breeders Crown which cost \$10,000 as Mac hadn't kept her eligible. But it fits well into her schedule and is at Woodbine and she showed last year that she was capable of racing with the best. She's also eligible to the Canadian Breeders and Fan Hanover as well as the Sires Stakes. We're pretty excited about her prospects for this year."

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