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THE EUROPEAN VIEW ~ By Klaus Koch

ITALIAN SCANDAL

The harness racing industry in Italy has been stunned with the charges of race fixing against the country's top drivers and trainers.



Klaus Koch

Photo by Monica Thors

The highly respected Italian sports paper *La Gazzetta dello Sport* recently published police information about on-going investigations into races that were allegedly fixed and abuse of medication on Standardbreds which has resulted in charges against a number of the country's most important trainers and drivers.

Italy is a country which always seems to have rumours about criminal activity. The presence of the mafia, mainly in the southern parts of the country, keep such rumours alive, although most people aren't really aware of the facts.

I have been travelling a lot in Italy, but I can't say that I ever encountered any mafia related activities.

But criminality has certainly occurred in the racing industry with the kidnapping of top trotters the most spectacular. Equinox Bi, whose victory in the 2007 Maple Leaf Trot may be watched by [clicking here](#), was kidnapped some years ago, but returned after a while. He was found strolling around on a highway (!) in central Italy.

The Pine Chip horse Daguet Rapide was gone even longer and lost more than a year as a sire. Champion sire Lemon Dra is still missing and will probably never return now being more than 20 years old. Some fast horses, always such without any white hairs or signs, are kidnapped for high-purse racing on the beaches in the southern part of the country. Those horses mainly

never return.

There have long been rumours of fixed races. The main focus has been on the so called "Triss" races, which are handicap races with 20 runners for a big trifecta pool.

There are two races a week, always as the last of the card at 6:30 p.m., and in the better days some years ago the turnover went beyond \$10 million US. The purse money for these races is quite low, instead owners are offered contributions of up to \$3,000 per horse.

It's easy to understand that such races could be subject to some kind of fixing, and continuous rumours have followed them and from time to time drivers have been accused of fraud.

It is well known that a number of top drivers from the northern part of Italy never compete in the Triss races in order to avoid "offers" to participate in race fixing. Strangely enough the geographic strength of the Triss races lies in the Tuscany region where major cities Florence and Pisa are located.

It's even in this province we'll find the trainers and drivers which have been accused by the police of fixing races. Among the accused is the country's most winning driver of all time Enrico Bellei, who recently represented Italy in the World Driving Championship in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Along with him are three German born trainers Holger Ehlert, Maik Esper and Claus Hollmann, the top catch driver



Enrico Bellei, who recently represented Italy at the World Driving Championship and annually wins more than 400 races, is one of those accused by the police of allegedly fixing races.

it is important that the truth is revealed and that the legislative system works.

This was all this time. Please do not hesitate to comment my articles. My e-mail address is ontrack@telia.com and as usual I would be more than happy to receive reaction from North American harness racing fans. 📧

Till next time,
Klaus Koch

Klaus Koch is one of Scandinavia's leading racing administrators and is perhaps best known for his former role as director of racing at Solvalla Racetrack.

Roberto Vecchione and a couple of other very successful professional horsemen who have been accused of fixing races and using prohibited medication on horses.


The whole thing was revealed by coincidence. Apparently the police were investigating another financial crime by using telephone tapping, during which a talk about a fixed race occurred. This led to extended tapping revealing more information about the topic.

There are also witnesses who should be able to confirm some of the acts. This was back in 2008, but the inquiries have not led to any indictments before now. In the beginning of October the accused will have to present at court, where it will be decided whether to proceed with or to terminate the case.

In the meantime the central organization, UNIRE, will allow the accused trainers and drivers to continue their business as usual, but of course this whole thing is very unpleasant to everybody and needs to be sorted out in order to either be freed or punished.

Enrico Bellei is winning more than 400 races each year. It shouldn't be necessary for him to participate in race fixing. Holger Ehlert is the top trainer of Italy. Okay, he has a couple of medication sentences behind him, but he is still the champion, who develops one stakes winner after the other.

It would be devastating for the industry if professionals like these two are found guilty of these accusations. No matter what,



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