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Remedies for Racing

How to repair a storied Maryland industry

LAST SATURDAY'S 134th running of the Preakness was at turns stirring and sobering. There was the spectacle of Rachel Alexandra galloping past the boys to become the first filly to win the race in 85 years. But there were also vast patches of unoccupied infield, a reminder that the horse racing industry's best days are furlongs in the past. As race fans reveled in the filly's triumph, many also wondered: What, if anything, should be done to save the Preakness?

First, a deep breath: The Preakness doesn't need saving. Though the owner of Pimlico Race Course, Magna Entertainment, recently filed for bankruptcy, the race itself is both popular and profitable. A purchaser with designs on moving the Preakness out of state would be met with a deafening public outcry along with a torrent of hand-tying legislation from Annapolis.

Rather, it's Maryland's horse racing industry that's at risk. The track in Laurel is, to be generous, rickety; Baltimore's Pimlico isn't much better. Empty seats dominate most days, and aficionados say that the quality of the fields has declined. Local breeders, who struggle to compete against deep-pocketed out-of-state owners, are suffering the most.

What can be done? The remedy, as we have long argued, isn't slot machines. That became evident May 12 when the Delaware legislature voted to expand gambling to allow table games and betting on sports. West Virginia is also making an aggressive play for bettors, meaning that Maryland is about to enter a gambling arms race with the equivalent of a peashooter.

Like any other business in a rough patch, the horse racing industry must innovate. Jeff Hooke, who chairs the Maryland Tax Education Foundation, wrote in a recent Baltimore Sun op-ed: "Rather than modernize the product, [the horse racing industry] spends more money to obtain (or maintain) lucrative slots subsidies than in attracting customers." Mr. Hooke proposes, among other remedies, more races at night, a new facility with fewer seats to replace Pimlico and additional off-track betting sites in Maryland. Andrew Beyer, The Post's longtime horse racing columnist, argues that the state should scale back its year-round schedule, that Pimlico should focus on premium races and that the Laurel track should do away with live racing.

Those are ideas worth exploring. They could do as much, if not more, to bolster Maryland's horse racing industry as slots could.