

# TDN Q&A



Bill Nader, the former vice president and chief operating officer of the New York Racing Association, left the organization in 2007 to take on the role of executive director of racing for the Hong Kong Jockey Club. Nader, who will preside over his fifth International Races meeting, this weekend, was gracious enough to take time out of a busy week to respond to a series of questions from the *TDN*:

*TDN: How have you adapted to life in Hong Kong? What are the similarities/differences to life in the U.S.?*

BN: Adapting to life in Hong Kong is relatively easy. The majority of the population here speak very good English, and it is easy to fit in. Authentic Chinese food is much different than the American version, and it takes a little time to make the adjustment. There is no such thing as a pu pu platter or a fortune cookie and a set lunch is not a) soup b) chicken, pork or beef and c) American-Chinese fried rice. Steamed fish is popular here and, clearly, the food is much better once you shock the American imitation out of your system. I am learning how to cook with my Susie Wong wok and it is fun because you can get a bit creative and add your own touch to any recipe. Any type of Western cuisine, from McDonald's to Morton's is available. Driving an automobile is a bit of a challenge, as you must learn to deal with roundabouts, heavy traffic and tricky double-white lines that restrict lane-changing on the roads. And, of course, everything is on the other side. Luxury and fashion are always on full display here and it is a lot like New York City, minus Broadway and professional sports.

*TDN: What is your favorite thing about Hong Kong?*

BN: My favourite thing about Hong Kong is the horse racing, I absolutely love it.

*TDN: How often do you make it back to the States?*

BN: Not as often as I should. My youngest son gave me a great wake-up call last week and told me that I need to make more of an effort. He gave me a good kick in the ass, so I will be home for Christmas for the first time since 2007. I generally come home for the Breeders' Cup, though I did miss it this year, but that was a one-off miss.

I will try to get back one more time in April to see my Mom, which would also be something new for me. My three kids and I get together for a bit of a family reunion every summer, but this year we might take that show on the road to Turkey and Lebanon.

*TDN: What special racing challenges do you face in Hong Kong?*

BN: The job is a killer, but I mean that in a good way. My portfolio is huge and the responsibilities mirror that. We license, operate, regulate--the whole enchilada. In business terms, our racing in this small place of 7 million people and 1200 horses is as big or bigger than America. Average wagering is US\$135 million per day. In addition, the Jockey Club is a leader in the Asian racing region, and I serve as Chairman of the Asian Pattern Committee. People here work extremely hard and if you do not have passion for your work, you will fail or simply not survive.

*TDN: To what do you attribute the popularity of the local racing product?*

BN: The racing product here is the complete package. It offers quality as illustrated last season with 19 Hong Kong horses included in the World Thoroughbred Rankings and great depth at the top level. We have quantity with average field size at 12.7 per race and rarely have a single-digit field of runners. We have the highest level of integrity and transparency. And, we have incredible liquidity in our wagering pools, which is the 'x' factor in making our offering the best racing and betting product in the world.

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*TDN: Is there anything, in your view, that can be done or changed to increase interest in horse racing in this part of the world?*

BN: To change or increase interest in horse racing in America, you first must be open to change and that is the most difficult part. You have to make the racing more attractive. Reducing the number of races, creating more situations where the good horses come together in competitive races, becoming more customer-centric in strategic thinking, trying to find ways to introduce racing to engage a new audience without using dollar beers and concerts as the only trigger--these are challenging tasks to influence change and increase interest.

*TDN: Some might view the racing in Hong Kong, even at the top handicap and local stakes level, as second rate. How would you address that?*

BN: I think that is complete rubbish. Group 3 horses in Europe are imported here and can struggle to win a Class 2 race in Hong Kong and may never make it into our top echelon of races. Hong Kong turf sprinters have been the best in the world over the last decade. The racing here at every level is anything but second rate. Pound for pound, the racing here is among the best in the world. A Class 1 race in Hong Kong is a Group/Grade 3 race almost anywhere else.

*TDN: What local horse or horses have impressed you the most, current or in the past?*

BN: Ambitious Dragon is a superstar--the Cup will be a great showdown with Cirrus des Aigles. Silent Witness was arguably the greatest turf sprinter in history when he won 17 in a row, though Australia's Black Caviar will now enter that debate as the all-time best. Good Ba Ba, a Keeneland graduate, was the world's best turf miler during my early days here, and his ability to accelerate when called upon was lethal. Viva Pataca was our version of Forego, the ability to perform at a high level over a long career. He was amazing. [The late] Vengeance Of Rain was great, the list goes on and on.

*TDN: The Hong Kong International Races are referred to as the "World Turf Championships." Do you think that designation is merited?*

BN: The designation of "World Turf Championships" fits here for two reasons. We have four Group 1 events at 1200, 1600, 2000 and 2400 [meters], so every distance is covered. We get horses from all over the world, usually between 10 and 12 countries represented.

*TDN: The purse of the Mile has been increased to HK\$20 million this year, making it the world's richest race at the distance. With purse money on the rise for the World Cup meeting and to a lesser extent at the Breeders' Cup, what changes, if any, do you foresee for the International Races purse structure?*

BN: We will not compete with Dubai on prize money. On the other hand, we try to motivate our local owners to purchase quality horses and by offering rich prize money in our top races, and I am sure it helps the cause. Hong Kong is noted as a home for some of the world's best sprinters and milers. We increased the prize money for the Mile to be equal to the Cup (2000m) at HK\$20 million. The Sprint and the Vase (2400m) are each at HK\$14 million. We will continue to monitor the increasingly competitive international landscape before making any future decisions. But, I am convinced that the complete experience is the major driver in recruiting top horses, and prize money is part of that package. When it comes to other part of that equation, we do a terrific job here, and those are the intangibles that I hope will sustain and improve our position going forward.

*TDN: In the past few years, the distance of the Sprint was changed from a straight five furlongs to a 1200-meter event around a bend. Given that some of the best stayers, such as Americain or Westerner, excel over slightly longer, is there any chance the distance of the Vase could be increased?*

BN: No, the Vase would never be run at a distance longer than 2400 meters. No chance. Americain finished third last year and we have Dunaden and Red Cadeaux, the first and second in the Melbourne Cup, in the Vase this year, but there is no chance we will go beyond 2400 during my lifetime.

*TDN: Is there anything that can be done to spur participation from American-based horses?*

BN: It would be a great day for America if a horse could come here and win and I promise, for those who can do it, it would be a mind-blowing experience. The key to spur participation is advance planning. The second Sunday in December has to be in the long-range plan.

*TDN : This year, there was no simulcast wagering on the Breeders' Cup races. Can you address that and whether anything can be done going forward?*

BN: We have limited simulcasting opportunities. When I first came to Hong Kong, the government restricted us to 10 races per year and those races had to occur on local race days. We now have an additional 15 simulcast days, where we can take about six races per day. Unfortunately, the Breeders' Cup fell out of the mix this year, as our concentration is on Australia and England, but we are working with three divisions of the government to make our case for further expansion of simulcasting. If successful, the Breeders' Cup will be the first that we bring back.

*TDN: The Dubai World Cup program begins in the early morning hours (on the U.S. East coast), enabling bettors to watch and bet on the races. Would the HKJC ever entertain the idea of a nighttime program for the HKIR to facilitate a simulcast in the U.S.?*

BN: No chance. The business case to do so is very weak and it would be wrong on many counts to do that to our local customers.

*TDN: Looking now a bit from the outside and with a total ban on raceday medication in Hong Kong, how do you view the current situation in the U.S. as it relates to the Lasix issue?*

BN: Medication-free racing works well in Hong Kong. Our vets, all employed by the Jockey Club, and our lab work with trainers to help them understand what is acceptable and what is recommended within the rules. There is a complete ban on Lasix. Yet, our horses race more times per season than those in America and they are more likely to return to the races within two to three weeks of their prior race. America has to step back and recall what Lasix was intended to do for the breed and for racing, and then objectively evaluate the results.