An Overnight Success

By Mary Forney

Anyone who's been around the racing office at mid-day during a live race meet has heard the constant refrain: "Are the overnights out yet?" It would be hard to find a piece of racing information that is more sought after on a daily basis.

Earlier this year, Santa Anita Racing Secretary, Rick Hammerle, developed a way to get the daily overnight out more quickly and easily than ever before, by taking advantage of the Internet, email, and handheld electronic devices such as Blackberries.

OvernightsNow.com premiered in February. What began as an experiment quickly became a hit with trainers, owners, jockey agents, and a host of other people whose businesses depend on access to racing office information.

Hammerle, a racing official for over 20 years, has been Racing Secretary for Santa Anita Park since 2003, having previously served as assistant racing secretary and stakes coordinator for Santa Anita. A graduate of the University of Arizona's Race Track Industry Program, he interned and had his first job at Golden Gate Fields and has also worked at Monmouth, the Meadowlands, and Gulfstream Park. He also does a live racing radio show on Sirius 126/XM 104, "At the Races with Steve Byk," every Friday at 3:00 p.m. (pst).

According to Hammerle, "The overnight is the first thing in racing – everywhere – that's created for the race day. Races are drawn three or four days in advance, and the whole point of drawing the races is to produce an overnight. That's the job of the racing office – to get an overnight out. So nothing starts until the overnight comes out. The jockeys see who they're riding, the owners see what race they're in, the trainers see what races they're in, the times, distances, and so on. The overnight is essentially the starting gun of the race day." The service quickly became an overnight success, even without any real advertising.

"I would just ask people, 'Would you like the overnight?' And the TOC, the CTT (California Thoroughbred Trainers), and the CTBA (California Thoroughbred Breeders Association) as individual groups thought it was great and let their members know about it," Hammerle said. "And I had hundreds and hundreds of people sign up. Not only are they getting the emails every day, they also go to the site, where I have the overnights archived, and they are able to go back and look at old overnights, or just go there and take it down themselves." As is commonly the case with technological innovations, one wonders why no one thought of this before.

"Racing offices in California have historically underused the Internet as a means of keeping owners, trainers, and other interested people in the loop," commented John Harris, owner, breeder and the chairman of the California Horse Racing Board. "In today's busy world, having overnights emailed promptly is a big help and encourages entries and interest. I congratulate Rick for getting this going in Southern California, and we all much appreciate it. It's a nice feature and something to build on."

The OvernightsNow website already averages about 1,000 hits a day. As Hammerle put it, "It shows that people really want information. And by archiving all the overnights, I found even bookkeepers go on and look to find out, for example, what a purse was last month."

"I'm not trying to take business away from any existing service," Hammerle added, "but just making it so much simpler. When you look around, everybody has a Blackberry or similar handheld device. And the beauty of getting the overnight by email is you can be at work, you can be at the beach, and you can sit down and look at your handheld and there the overnight is! I think that, across the board, we can do a better job as an industry of getting the information to the people. And I have a unique ability because of where I am and what I do. I have the information here – it's at my fingertips. So why not get it out there?"

The reaction has been nothing but positive. Brian Beach, jockey agent for Alex Solis, was one of the first to sign up for the service. Beach said, "It's nice because as an agent, people are always calling me to ask, 'Did we draw yet? What race is it? What post?' And often by the time the overnight comes out, we've already gone home. So having it right on my phone, I don't have to walk back to the racing office."

Scott Henry, agent for Morningstar Horse Transportation and a liaison for the CTBA, has found that getting the overnight so quickly has been especially helpful in the vanning business. "It's two or three hours quicker," said Henry. "Sometimes it's up by 11:30 or 12:30, and that's very good because you can plan your day. Two hours makes a big difference."

Trainer Howard Zucker was another one of the first to sign up for the service. "Trainers have to look at so much media and printed matter in the course of a day," Zucker said, "that sometimes it is hard to remember to go to a website and look for an overnight or stop in the racing office on a daily basis and pick one up. Now it's sitting in my email inbox and is easy to look at. It's truly a time saver."

"Everyone has one of these," Hammerle concluded, holding up his own Blackberry. "And that's the way it is; that's how the information is received, like it or not. If you can't get them information on their hand held machine, it's too late. By the time they get home, that information's old stuff. Just staying up with the times is going to be huge. I don't see why we can't take the next step as an industry. I think it will help in getting new people into the game."

In response to users' requests, Hammerle is hoping to make more information available than just the overnights beginning with the Oak Tree meet in the fall.

"Santa Anita has embraced this service; hopefully other racetracks in the state will do so as well. So far it's been met with nothing but positive responses. What we're looking for is just to keep people involved in the game. And just continually giving them something that they want, I think that helps."

To sign up, simply go to www.OvernightsNow.com and enter your name and email address.