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Representing the Thoroughbred Horsemen and Horsewomen of Ontario

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Justice Committee – Single-Event Sports Wagering – Sue Leslie

Good afternoon and thank you, Madame Chair, and the committee, for the opportunity to speak before you on this very important topic.

On any given morning between February and December - during a normal year without restrictions caused by COVID-19 – you would find thousands of people working hard on the backstretch of the Woodbine Racetrack. For those not familiar with horse racing, the backstretch is the stabling area usually behind, or on the backside, of a racetrack. Its really its own little community with upwards of 4,000 people working there every day. This is where horse people not only train their horses to race, but its where they provide the extensive care for the wellbeing of the upwards of 2,000 racehorses that reside there.

I have been a part of this community for more than 40 years and had the privilege of holding various leadership positions across the industry. Currently, I am the Chair and President of the Horseman's Benevolent and Protective Association – the HBPA – and have held this position for the last 16 years. Today, I am here representing those horse people and their families.

In 2012, I also had the privilege of being the Chair for the Ontario Horse Racing Industry Association when the industry faced a financial crisis due the Government of Ontario's decision to end the Slots at Racetracks Program – which at the time was the funding model used by the Government to support the horse racing industry and its tens of thousands of jobs across the province.

This one decision nearly killed the horse racing industry. The industry seemed to be collapsing right before my eyes. I won't go into the very sad details including the welfare of the horses and the sheer worry of thousands of families.

Fortunately, we were able to show the Government the devastation caused by this decision and an alternative financial solution was provided which saved the horse racing industry in Ontario.

I reference this time in our history because while we support Bill C218 and the legalization of sports betting, it reminds me of the devastation we faced back then and the potential devastation horse racing and breeding would face again if the Federal Government does not include language to protect our industry – much like Bill C13 did.

To further explain my significant concern on unintended consequences the industry could face, it's important to understand that the costs associated with horse racing are substantial. This is true for the racetrack operators, and also the owners.

If it was permitted for an organization other than a racetrack operator to take legal fixed odds bet on horse racing, without paying for any of these substantial costs, then the business model the entire industry sits on would be completely broken.

Further, as an owner myself, and someone who is constantly looking for more owners to join our sport and help drive its future sustainability, the recruitment of these owners is very difficult now and would be nearly impossible if horse racing wasn't protected from the cannibalization of our business model.

Due to the investments made by horse owners and racetrack operators, with support from the government, the horse racing and breeding industry supports more than 50,000 jobs across the country. Many of these jobs are blue collar jobs in rural Ontario. Most of these workers have spent their entire lives working on farms with horses and would have a difficult time finding new careers should the industry be drastically reduced.

Our farmers, owners, trainers, breeders and caretakers are only a part of the jobs and economic activity we create. We also employ veterinarians, blacksmiths, jockeys, contractors, trainers, physio techs, the list goes on. In addition, we build barns, arenas, fences, run in sheds, we plough fields, plant crops, buy tractors, vans, pick up trucks, etc. We produce 5.7 billion annually in economic activity. I would say an industry more than worthy of protecting. I want to re-iterate 5.7 billion in economic activity and 50,000 jobs.

We are asking for your help to make sure our competitors, who could cannibalize our product through fixed odds single event sports wagering do not also profit from us when they pay nothing toward the cost of production.

I have spent a fair amount of time speaking about the people and the families whose livelihoods depend on this industry. We must also consider the horses. Our product is a living, breathing equine who requires 24/7 care which is a very a labour-intensive product. If our people can't earn their living through horse racing industry, they will lose the income needed to also take care of their livestock.

As an industry we must do all we can to convince you that language which protects the pari-mutuel bet must be re-inserted into Bill C-218. This will ensure all wagering on horse racing continues to operate within the federally regulated pari-mutuel system and only by the local horse racing industry. If this wording is not re-instated in the bill, it will destroy the horseracing industry along with the 50,000 jobs it supports.

The horse racing industry has a long and successful history of working with Government and its agencies. We have established a good working relationship with the AGCO and CPMA who licenses racetracks and oversees the pari-mutuel betting. We are committed to continue to work with both levels of Government to maximize the return to Government while doing the same for horseracing.

To that end, the HBPA and our thousands of members also support the introduction of Historical Horse Racing (HHR) which would create new revenue for our industry while helping to offset the cannibalization created by single sport wagering. Allowing horseracing to protect the pari-mutuel wager while introducing historical horse racing would help us be sustainable and eventually move us towards being self-sustained without the need for Government funding as is the case in many jurisdictions.

Horse racing has a proud, worldwide history. Canada has produced some of the greatest racehorses that ever lived including the great Northern Dancer.

I believe our Government has a responsibility and duty to the industry and the 50,000 Canadians who make a living in our rural communities to include language in this bill to ensure a vibrant horse racing industry, alongside a brand-new sports betting industry that could become an equally productive industry in generating jobs and economic activity.

This is the RIGHT thing to do for our people, their families, and our horses.

Thank you, Madame Chair, for the privilege of addressing you today and look forward to answering any questions the Committee may have.

Respectfully,

Sue Leslie