



TDN Q&A: CRAIG FRAVEL

TDN Q&A: Breeders' Cup President Craig Fravel



Craig Fravel
Benoit photo

Craig Fravel became the fifth president and chief executive officer of Breeders' Cup Ltd. in July 2011. The former president and general manager of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club was a partner in the San Diego law firm of Luce, Forward, Hamilton and Scripps before joining the seaside track as its executive vice president back in 1990. The 54-year-old recently caught up with *TDN's* Steve Sherack for a question and answer session to discuss the quickly approaching Breeders' Cup World Championships at Churchill Downs and much more.

Even without Zenyatta competing in the Breeders' Cup this year, there are still plenty of intriguing storylines--Goldikova going for her fourth straight win in the GI Breeders' Cup Mile, Havre de Grace taking on the boys in the GI Breeders' Cup Classic and Uncle Mo returning for the big one after winning last term's GI Breeders' Cup Juvenile. Is there a certain race or horse that you're looking forward to seeing the most?

CF: Personally, I'm looking forward to seeing Goldikova. For a horse to win four Breeders' Cup races in a row would be a pretty amazing accomplishment if she could pull it off. The other horse I'm watching, Union Rags, is because of his connections--Phyllis Wyeth and her husband Jamie, who's an artist. It's kind of a small stable, but it's a really neat story about the people.

The Breeders' Cup expanded to a two-day format in 2007, and will have another new race added this year in the Juvenile Sprint. Can we expect further expansion moving forward?

CF: When we looked at the expansion for this race, one other possibility was considered, but it was decided to take it one step at a time. I think that there's a chance that we'll move from 15 to 16 [Breeders' Cup] races at some point. Eight and eight sounds better to me than seven and eight.

TDN Q&A

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Which division would get a new race?

CF: Right now, I don't know. We'll step back and look at all the races and see how they do with the reception from horsemen and the wagering public, and see if we need to make any tweaks or changes.

Popular, charismatic owners like Mike Repole, Bobby Flay and Kevin Plank--who are also well known outside of the racing world--all won Breeders' Cup races in 2010. Does that help racing and what the Breeders' Cup is trying to accomplish for the sport?

CF: The job of the Breeders' Cup is ultimately to promote the breeding and sales of Thoroughbreds. So, when we can get guys like that who are passionate about the sport and who bring a slightly different look and feel about them from what we may've had traditionally, it's great. We like owners both old and young, and we're glad to have these young ones coming in and changing things up.

What's been your favorite moment in Breeders' Cup history?

CF: I was recently watching some highlight reels from the past couple of years and it's certainly hard to pick just one. When Zenyatta came from off the pace and won the Classic at Santa Anita in 2009 is my personal favorite.

Is there any talk of the Breeders' Cup ever being held overseas?

CF: We haven't had any conversations since I've been here, but that's only since July. I do know that they've had conversations about that in the past though. Whether it's a practical option or not is unclear because so much of our revenues are dependant upon wagering income, and the ability to generate that kind of income elsewhere is a big question mark. I certainly think it would be a fun thing to do, but whether it really works and whether we can continue to support the domestic industry that way is an open question.

Have any new tracks shown an interest in hosting the Breeders' Cup?

CF: I think we're looking at [small racetrack in the Midwest]. No, I'm kidding. There haven't been any new shooters raising their hands since I've been here.

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The new race-day medication policy, which bans Lasix from competition at the Breeders' Cup in 2012, has been a lightning rod for discussion and has really split the industry. What was the thought process behind making the change?

CF: The thought process behind the new policy is that we want to make sure that the Championships are conducted on a basis where their outcomes are not impacted by medication, and where we are truly identifying champions as well as keeping Championships on a level playing field across the world.

The policy announced by the Breeders' Cup was directed *just* at the Breeders' Cup. It wasn't intended to create new rules for people to follow in particular racing jurisdictions.

I've gone back and looked at some of the early Breeders' Cups, and interestingly enough, there were very few horses running on Lasix in those days. Clearly, it's something that can be done.

What kind of response have you been getting from horsemen?

CF: Internationally, horsemen love it, and domestically, for the most part, they are very unenthusiastic. We hope that they view it as a worthwhile approach and continue to support the Breeders' Cup.

It was a record year for the Breeders' Cup in 2010, which established a new mark for attendance as well as across-the-board gains in wagering revenue. Can we expect the positive trend to continue this year? What are your expectations?

CF: I think as a practical matter that you're going to have some hangover effect from Zenyatta. We estimate about \$10 million worth of earned advertising from Zenyatta's appearance on *60 Minutes* and other national news publications covering [her story]. It would be hard to top that.

Did you set any specific goals once taking over the reins at the Breeders' Cup?

CF: I think that the Breeders' Cup needs to be recognized as the kind of championship event that it is. Every major sport needs a major championship. My main objective is to build on that to make sure that the Breeders' Cup is recognized by the industry, both domestically and internationally, as the premier event in racing. I think it is now and it can get better, too.

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What are some of the challenges facing the Breeders' Cup right now?

CF: The Breeders' Cup is not alone in the challenges of a declining foal crop that are certainly going to impact the bottom line. But, I think at the end of the day, hopefully there's going to be a flight to quality, and events like the Breeders' Cup that provide a platform for the best will thrive.

During your time at Del Mar you helped draw a younger audience to the racetrack through concerts and other events. Will the Breeders' Cup employ this strategy at some point as well?

CF: I think we're going to take a look at those kind of options and things that might have a little broader appeal in future years. I'm not sure exactly what form we will take, but we're open to trying things.

Was it a hard decision to leave your post as president at Del Mar and relocate to Kentucky?

CF: It was about 42 degrees and raining with the wind blowing massively the other morning, so I did give it a second thought for a minute or two [laughs].

But you know, change is good. My family (wife Cathie and daughters Sarah and Ireland) is adapting great. The best part about it is that we're surrounded by horses everywhere and that's such a big part of our lives. It makes it a very special place to be.



Craig & Cathie Fravel
Horsephotos

Did you get a chance to make it out to the races at Keeneland?

CF: Oh yeah. My 7-year-old loves going to Keeneland; we've been there three or four times. We've had a really nice meet from a weather standpoint. You can't beat it.

What do you love about racing and how were you introduced to the sport?

CF: I was introduced to the sport when I moved to California in 1985. Del Mar racetrack was one of my clients as a lawyer and I didn't have much exposure to racing before that. The great thing about Del Mar is that it's a really happening scene, and it was even in those days. Most of San Diego finds their way to the racetrack at least one time or another during the summer.

I think the great thing about racing is how it appeals to people on so many levels. You've got the Turf Club types, the backstretch guys and everybody in between. It's a great environment for everybody.