

Race-track grab a cynical move

The racing shakeup that spells the end of tracks at Hawera and Stratford mirrors what's been going on with Plunket and banks - local assets go to a central body so the organ as a whole can survive.

For locals, it's bad luck if you and your forebears spent more than a century creating the asset. Egmont Racing Club began in 1882 and bought the 28 hectares occupied by the Hawera racecourse for \$2600 in 1902. Stratford's course, called Te Kapua Park, has been going for more than 125 years,

The outcome of the racing industry's self-examination, safely conducted by an Aussie, is a model of cynicism for Taranaki. If your racing club owns its course – as Egmont (Hawera) and Stratford do - you're gone. Your bit of land is nothing but real estate that can be sold to prop up the other two courses, which are leased from councils.

I'd have liked to believe the Waverley course is surviving for sentimental reasons: it was a local base for Kiwi, one of our greatest Melbourne Cup winners. But no, it's now owned by South Taranaki District Council, so has no redeemable value for Racing Minister Winston Peters.

One story I can tell about the Waverley course dates from the late 60s and concerns an old pilot mate of mine. He'd just got his licence and decided to fly down to Whanganui, but he got lost when the weather closed in, so put down on the racecourse. When he later took off, he ploughed through some tree-tops at one end, but survived. He still flies.

My early history was as deeply rooted in the racing industry as it could be without the family actually owning a horse. Dad was a keen racing man. When we were little, going to the races was a regular family day out. Our biggest hero was a distant relative named Peter Wolfenden, who raced trotting legend Cardigan Bay.

Dad claimed he never spent any of "our" money. His bets were placed from his TAB account, which he reckoned he never had to top up. Given his knowledge of the game, and later involvement as treasurer of the local trotting club, I had no reason to disbelieve.

But not all of us were convinced life should revolve around animals big enough to trample you and unreliable enough to cost you hard-earned pay. By the time I started work as a reporter on the Taranaki Herald, I'd had enough of race-days, a sentiment that hardened when Dad drove to Hamilton and back one day to place some kind of complicated bet for him and his betting syndicate, and suffered his first heart attack from the effort (or was it the loss?).

I foolishly mentioned that at work and wondered why the chief reporter's eyes lit up. He'd finally found someone he could send to meetings with the racing editor and be confident the betting windows would be no distraction.

My job was easy enough. The racing editors took it in turns to do "the call", during which they followed the race through binoculars and gave a running commentary on the place of each horse as the event unfolded. I had to write down what they called. The information was then shared among them - as was the bottle of scotch presented as we arrived by the racing club secretary: "Here you go, boys, this'll warm the cockles."

My cockles remained unwarmed, however; at 17, I was considered too young to share the bribe. And if you've ever been to Stratford for a race meeting in the middle of winter, you'll know how bloody cold the cockles and all other parts of the anatomy could get. I'm glad to see its single annual meeting is in summer.

08.09.2018 JT column – race track grab

There's one thing I wonder about. Renewal of the council lease for the New Plymouth racecourse is still pending, after some bureaucratic screwup that left it hanging. I guess that will be quickly sorted now Winston says money will be coming this way to improve the track.

I wonder what would have happened if New Plymouth District Council's quixotic attempt to sell half Fitzroy golf course had succeeded, and emboldened councillors had looked around for other big reserves to flog off. Auckland developers must be salivating about Avondale Racecourse.

Will Winston now need special legislation to protect his surviving "assets" if they're owned by unpredictable – but at least locally elected – councils?