

# THE CANADIAN SPORTSMAN

January 18, 2007

\$3

## Fair Skies

Good things are happening at Western Fair Raceway thanks to the formidable trio of Ian Fleming, Hugh Mitchell and Frank Salive.

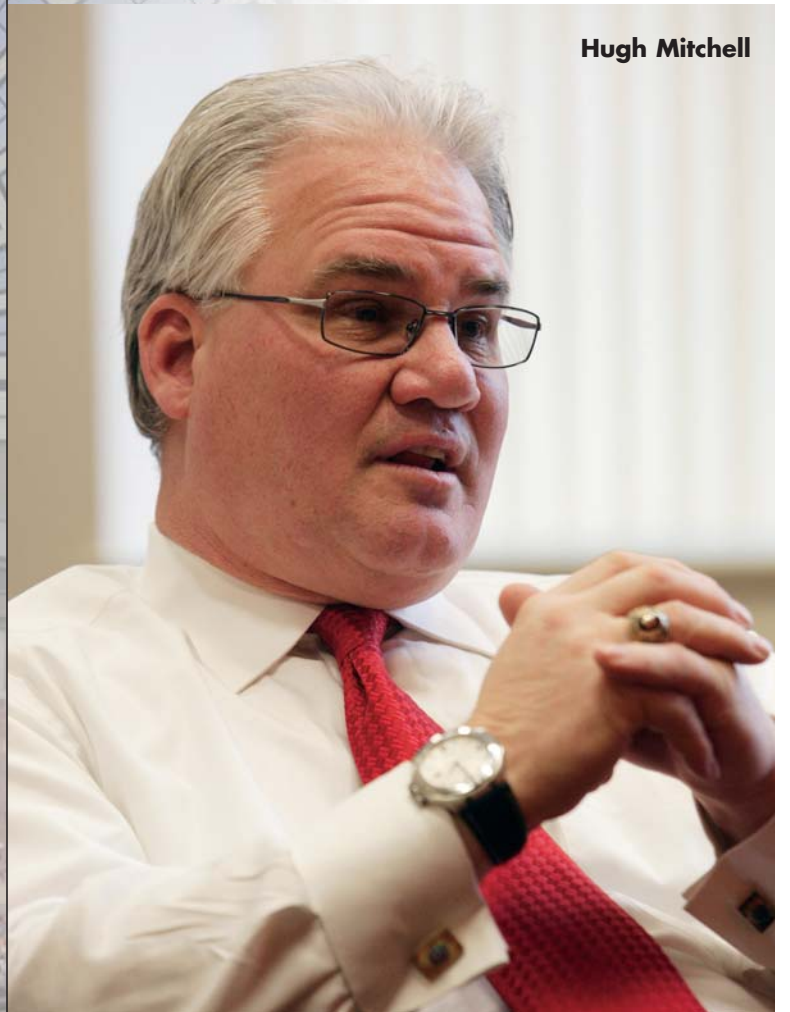
# Good Times at the

FAIR  
RACETRACK  
SLOTS

## Thanks to

Hugh Mitchell, Ian Fleming and Frank Salive  
— three of the most respected men in racing  
— betting numbers are up at Western Fair Raceway.

Hugh Mitchell



**W**e begin with a caveat. Western Fair Raceway (WFR) is not changing the world. It's not reinventing the sulky wheel. It's not even growing the business — yet. But, as Hugh Mitchell said, the new reality in an industry in decline is “sometimes — and I hate to say it — holding your own is a step forward.”

Lately, the London, ON track has been more than holding its own — though Mitchell, the Western Fair Association's chief operating officer, practically cringes at even the suggestion that some promising handle figures could be an indication of something concrete in terms of a positive trend. Mitchell, the former senior vice-president of racing at the Woodbine Entertainment Group (WEG), has been around long enough to know the industry ebbs and flows; and speaking about the flows can anger the gods

of wagering.

All that said, WFR's racing and gaming manager, Ian Fleming, does quietly slip in the fact that simulcast wagering on Western Fair's product is up some 50 per cent over last year. Fleming, as talented and as respected race secretary as they come, and a man who shares major credit for the track's minimalist revival, even allows that wagering on WFR races on track is up slightly.

Total handle on Mondays, Western Fair's biggest night of the week, has routinely topped \$300,000. Tuesday afternoons (4 p.m. post), the track's second biggest card of the week, have topped \$200,000 with regularity.

The holiday period was particularly buoyant for Western Fair's bottom line. Not only did the track race six straight days just before Christmas with strong results, but its traditionally-big Boxing Day

STORY BY DAVE BRIGGS | PHOTOS BY CLAUS ANDERSEN

# Fair

card produced a record handle of \$377,820, easily shattering the previous best of \$348,865 set in 1988.

There's a positive vibe at the track these days and long-time WFR regular Ruleen Lilley of Mac Lilley Farms of Dutton, ON knows why. "There were two moments that have absolutely changed that track — the first was getting Hugh Mitchell back and the second was Frank Salive. It's done so much for the attitude of the horsepeople when they see people come from the big time back to their roots," she said.

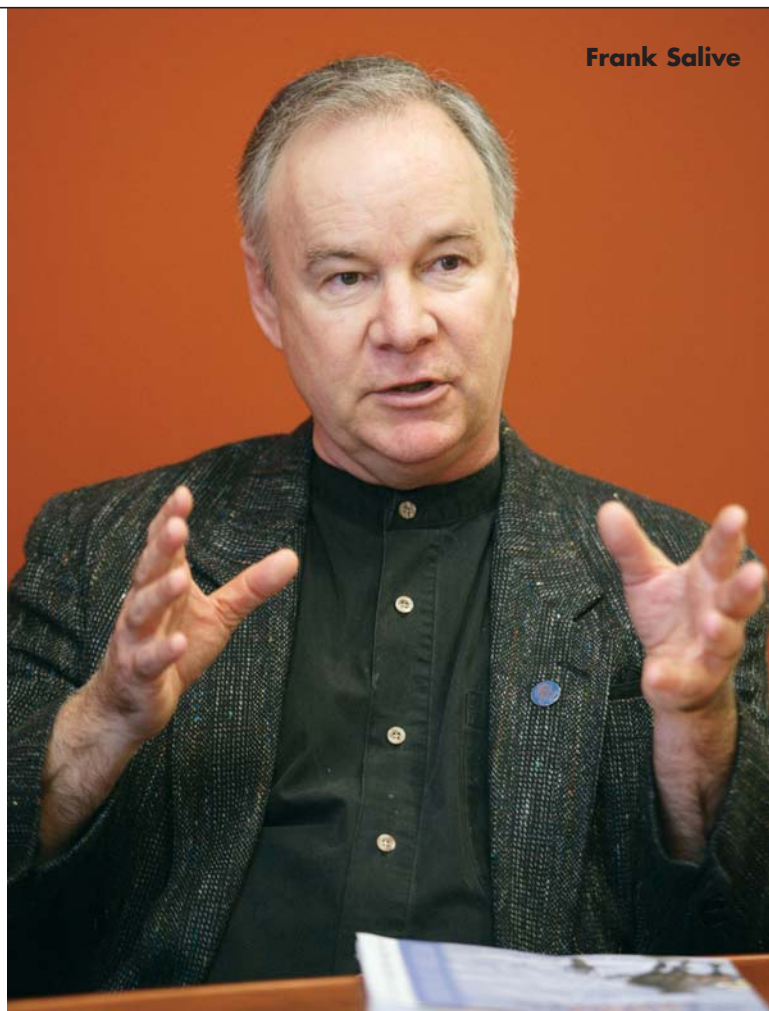
Mitchell, who had two prior stints in upper management at WFR, returned to the association in April of 2005 after seven years in Toronto. Six months later, Salive joined him after 14 years calling the races at WEG.

In the industry, Mitchell's name can open doors. Salive's voice can stop people in their tracks.

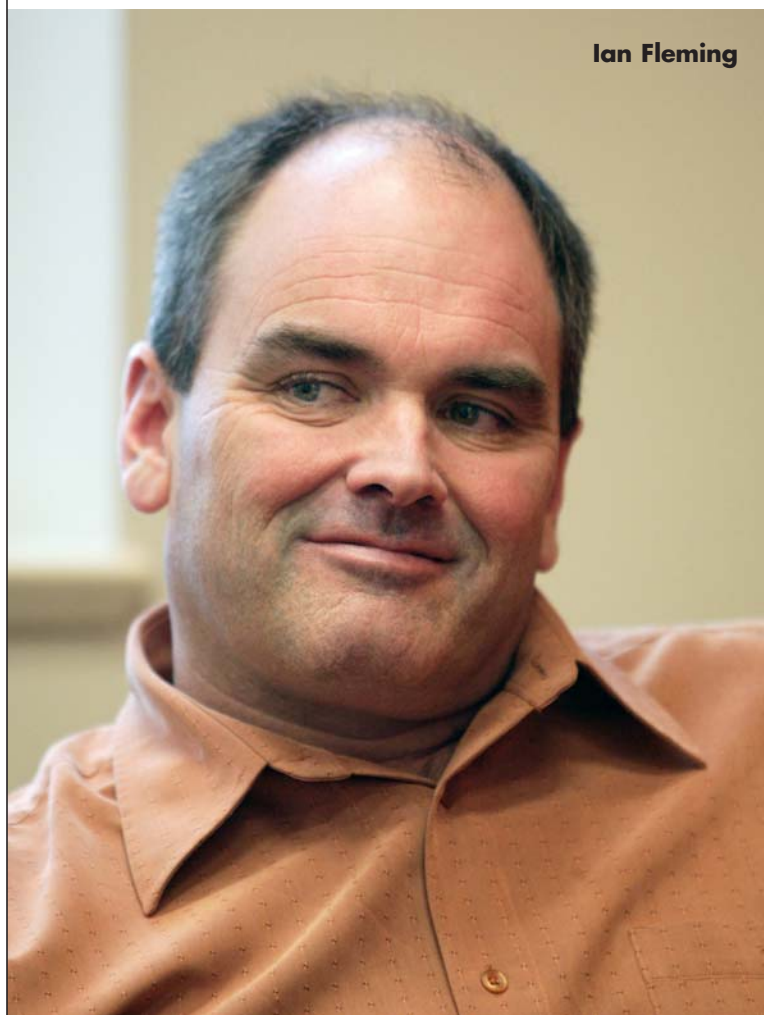
The men are the two main reasons why Western Fair is the only Canadian racing outfit other than WEG to crack the lucrative simulcast menu at the Meadowlands. Mitchell is a familiar name to Meadowlands management from his days at WEG. Salive's voice is instantly recognizable to Big M patrons thanks to his long tenure calling races for WEG where he earned a reputation as the voice of Canadian racing.

The Big M takes Western Fair's signal on Monday nights and Tuesday afternoons. Fleming said Meadowlands patrons bet around \$25,000 to \$30,000 on Mondays on the tiny London track, accounting for some 10 per cent of WFR's total handle.

"Frank won't tell you this, but I will: his presence is an important component to the product. It really is. Name recognition. Voice recognition," Mitchell said.



Frank Salive



Ian Fleming

Salive is, in essence, the name on the product. Besides calling races, doing the simulcast broadcast, handicapping the races for the program, recording radio commercials for the track and sending out a weekly press release, Salive is now helping sell the simulcast signal since Will Alempijevic, the former simulcast sales manager, left in September to take a new job in the industry.

Fleming credits Alempijevic for helping WFR crack a number of new markets in the U.S. "A lot of the markets that we were into this fall are ones that he got started for us last year. He did a good enough job that Magna hired him to work at Portland Meadows."

Yet, despite the growth in off-track betting on racing from Western Fair, Mitchell is still cautious about what the improving numbers really mean. "I'd feel more comfortable if we were grow-

ing the business, but we're not, to be honest with you," Mitchell said. "Although, statistically, we're seeing some improvements in our uplink, or remote wagering support, that's due, in large part, to the efforts of Frank (Salive) and Ian (Fleming) and Will (Alempijevic) before him. But, it's not new wagering. It's somebody else's in the North American market's wagering. So, that's disconcerting. So, it's hard for a business to sustain itself long-term if it isn't generating new customers. That's what I don't think the industry is doing right now."

For the time being, Mitchell, Fleming and Salive say small tracks such as Western Fair have to know their place in the greater racetrack universe and find the best spot to fit in. Mitchell called it hitting base hits, not home runs. Fleming said it's more about racing when other

# Western Fair

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tracks are not.

"That decision is a classic example of focusing on driving wagering. It means moving post times and race dates," Mitchell said. In other words, following the lead of tracks such as Grand River Raceway which learned long ago the best way to drive handle was to send its signal into the lucrative Toronto market on the nights when there was the least competition on the simulcast menu.

Western Fair has also joined forces with Grand River, Kawartha Downs and Georgian Downs to wiggle post times around so as not to race on top of each other on

nights when they double up. "It's just coordinating post times," Fleming said. "Our tote rooms spend a lot of time setting post times trying to constantly adjust them as the night goes on. The judges have been good that way, too. It used to be if you asked for extra time you could never get it, but I think they realized how much it helps the bet.

"The horsemen are good that way. A lot of places people work, if there was a delay and they said, 'Well, you're not getting off work for another hour tonight' the squawking would be terrible, but the horsepeople know that if the tote room calls down and says, 'We're holding this race up for a minute because it's going to help the handle' they never say a word.

"Obviously, we're betting

\$300,000 and the Meadowlands bets \$3 million, so, we don't for one minute think we're the premier product. We have to kind of slide in around them." Driving wagering has been a key mantra Mitchell has espoused since he arrived back in London. "Our mindset very quickly got into focusing on wagering and gaming. I think we have a focus now that's pretty strong on wagering and gaming and pushing the envelope as best we can," Mitchell said.

"We're really focused on our product. We provide the simulcast menu, but we're really focused on wagering whether it's inside our market or outside on our product."

Having labour peace is also crucial. Last year, the track lost a handful of dates at the beginning of January while negotiating a

new contract with the Ontario Harness Horse Association (OHHA). The major sticking point between the sides was race dates. Western Fair came up with a creative solution — a flexible number of race cards based on revenue from the prior year. The number of days can't drop below 130 or exceed 150.

"It's a five-year deal. (The horsepeople) stand to benefit from it. What I like about it is we remained focused on wagering because an important threshold in there was commissions earned. It got us all focused on the customer indirectly and focusing on what we're all here for and that's for pari-mutuel wagering, first and foremost. We still try to work it as selling it as a sporting event, but to be honest with you, our priority is driving wagering."

Unlike other tracks suffering horse shortages, Western Fair, nicely positioned as the king of Ontario's winter B-tracks, has more horses than it needs.

"I didn't know there was such a thing as too many horses," Mitchell said, laughing. "All the problems rest with Ian to deal with it."

One thing Mitchell can't change is the size of the track. "I'd prefer to be on a five-eighths mile track. I'd prefer to put nine horses in the field. We exhausted that this summer. We had (track builder) Greg Coon come up and we wanted to change the perimeter somewhat to be able to accommodate an extra horse. We're landlocked," Mitchell said. "I would have loved to increase that track size and add another horse or two on the gate, but we're all born with a certain eye colour and you can't change it. Western Fair Raceway was born with a half-mile track. I think we should focus on things we can control and one of them, unfortunately isn't, track size. So you move on from that."

Just like any small track, staff must roll up their sleeves and get to work. Salive, for one, loves juggling his new responsibilities and having a direct impact on the product.

Even the boss gets into the act with gusto. Salive recalled the snow storm which dumped 50 cm of snow on London in December and how Mitchell was up on the grandstand roof, in a snowmobile suit, knocking the snow off the satellite dishes so the track could offer its off-track wagering menu that day. "In the overall context of things, and he's much too humble to say this, but he's the chief operating officer of the Western Fair Association with seven or eight business lines reporting to him," Salive said. "But, the racing is near and dear to his heart, which is great solace to us racing people." 

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