

# The Bloodhorse

## 'Realities' Force Calder Date Cuts

**By Jim Freer**  
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Photo: Leslie Martin

Calder Race Course has asked the Florida Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering for permission to hold live racing four days a week, rather than five, during 11 weeks beginning Sept. 1.

Under its original 2008 schedule, Calder has been racing four days a week in August — with Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays dark. The Miami Gardens, Fla., track had planned to resume Monday racing in September.

But Calder decided to extend its number of four-day weeks “due to the general economic realities in the industry” and the lingering

impact of this year’s contract disputes and blackouts of Calder’s signal, Kevin Flanery, a spokesman for the track’s parent, Churchill Downs Inc., said on Aug. 27.

When asked if CDI is considering a cut in purses at Calder, Flanery said “at this point, we are not considering any other immediate actions.”

The Florida DPMW is reviewing Calder’s request for fewer racing dates but does not have a timetable for a decision, said division spokeswoman Alexis Antonacci.

Dates that Calder has requested to not hold races are: Sept. 4, 8, 15, 22 and 29; Oct. 6, 16, 20 and 27; and Nov. 3 and 17. Sept. 4 and Oct. 16 are Thursdays, during weeks when Labor Day and Columbus Day are Mondays on which Calder will hold races. The other newly-planned dark dates are Mondays.

The Florida Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association’s board of directors has given its required approval to Calder’s dates request.

“We are doing what we can to help save this year’s meet,” said Kent Stirling, the Florida HPBA’s executive director.

Calder began its season on April 21. Amid contract disputes and the economic downturn, Calder’s all-sources handle has declined 56% year-to-date through Aug. 24, according to The Jockey Club Information Systems.

Largely because of those disputes, Calder’s average field size has been 7.43, compared with 8.06 in 2007. Flanery and Stirling both expect that a temporary move to four-day weeks will lead

to larger fields, which will be more attractive for on-site and simulcast bettors.

Calder and the Florida HPBA did not have a purse contract until July 7. Prior to that contract signing, the Florida HPBA used authority under the Interstate Horseracing Act to prevent Calder from sending its simulcast signal to racetracks outside Florida. During that period, horsemen's groups in eight states prohibited tracks from sending signals to Calder.

On July 7, the Florida HPBA and groups in the other states lifted those simulcasting bans.

But except for six New York State OTB franchises, Calder has not signed contracts with any advance deposit wagering companies. The national Thoroughbred Horsemen's Group is negotiating Calder's 2008 ADW contract with CDI.

During late April and early May, Calder cut average daily overnight purses 30% and cut most overnight stakes' purses to \$36,000. Those cuts prompted some owners and trainers to move horses to tracks in northern states, thus leading to smaller fields at Calder.

Beginning July 10, Calder restored average daily overnight purses from about \$130,000 to \$180,000 — the level at the start of the meet. Calder also restored overnight stakes to \$55,000

Through this July 6, Calder's average daily handle was \$729,465. That was 73% lower than the daily average of about \$2.7 million for the same period last year.

Since full simulcasting resumed on July 10, Calder's average daily all-sources handle has improved to \$2 million. But that is about 31% lower than the average of \$2.9 million for a comparable period last year — when Calder was available to ADW bettors.

Those numbers have led CDI to consider options to reduce Calder's expenses, Flanery said.

"We are looking at the business of how wagering is originated and are working with horsemen and other parties on how to make the best decisions," he said.

To help reduce expenses, Calder several weeks ago closed its fourth floor on weekends and closed its third floor on all days.

Several fans at Calder have told *The Blood-Horse* they know large bettors who stopped going to the track during the simulcast blackout and have not returned.

The track will end its Calder meeting on Oct. 19 and begin its 11-week Tropical meeting on Oct. 20. The Tropical meeting annually attracts numerous top trainers from northern tracks, and includes three December cards with graded stakes.

Many horsemen remain hopeful that handle and other revenue will start rebounding at Calder beginning Oct. 18, when it holds its annual "Festival of the Sun" program.

Meanwhile, Calder is among numerous South Florida businesses whose revenues are down this year because of factors that include high gas prices and the real estate slowdown.

Calder also is facing stepped-up competition for gaming dollars — most notably from the nearby Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, Fla. This year, the Seminole Tribe of Florida upgraded to Class III Las Vegas-style slot machines and put in Florida's first blackjack and baccarat tables at that casino.

On July 3, the Supreme Court of Florida ruled that Gov. Charlie Crist exceeded his authority when he permitted the Seminoles to have a form of gambling, namely blackjack and baccarat, which is illegal elsewhere in Florida. The Seminoles appealed that ruling on July 17, and have

continued to operate their new table games.

Calder plans to build a casino with Class III slot machines, but CDI has not announced a date for start of construction.

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