

## Attitude adjustment at Fort Erie

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New management at Fort Erie Race Track is looking for a new attitude at the historic border oval.

"The only way that anything will succeed here is if the horsemen have more confidence and bring in more horses and better quality," said Jim Thibert, chief executive officer for The Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium.

"We will eventually find out if we have new trainers coming on board and new horse stock and if the wagering community believes that we have better meets with better horses.

"But what we have done here is create a foundation that makes the best opportunity to achieve that goal."

The consortium took over operations at the thoroughbred horse track Jan. 1 as part of an ongoing transition from a private-sector company to a not-for-profit model.

After a press conference about new management at the track Thursday, Thibert said he looks forward to creating new and more personal relationships with the horsemen.

"We really need to bring more horses on, bring up confidence, more confidence in the quality of the races and meets here in order to attract more horses and more wagering," said Thibert.

The consortium, made up of members from Fort Erie's Economic Development and Tourism Corporation, the Town of Fort Erie and the Ontario Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, has hired six new managers with more employee decisions still yet to be made.

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Thibert said one of the consortium's goals is to make the community more a part of the racing product.

"We're trying to get ... a situation where we can get the community back into the track for public events, for horse racing events and for other community events," he said.

"We want the people in Fort Erie to know that they have an asset here that's the biggest tourist attraction in this area. It's a fun place to go and it doesn't cost any money to come in and see the horses."

The 113th season of live racing at the track starts May 1. There's 78 days of scheduled race dates.

"The plan is for \$100,000 a day, which is a purse structure of about \$7.8 million for the season," said Thibert, adding about 1,000 stalls have already been allotted to trainers.

So far, about 500 horses have already arrived. Thibert says he's confident the track will fill up.

He said about \$15,000 has been spent to clean and bring the backstretch kitchen up to standard.

The consortium will also petition the federal government to help with ongoing engineering work, such as grants to "fix the place up" and other cosmetic maintenance.

Thibert said Sue Leslie, consortium and Ontario Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association president, is still working with the Ontario Racing Commission on a pilot project to bring quarter-horses to Fort Erie.

Thibert plans to meet with Leslie Monday to discuss a number of issues.