

Racing's next move: can we learn from other sports to thrive?

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Racing jurisdictions around the globe are suffering increased losses in revenue and crowd participation, as noted to delegates attending the 2023 Asian Racing Conference in Australia earlier this year.



In looking at history, it is evident that the fortunes of many sporting disciplines improved spectacularly when they started following ‘Roads Not Taken’—a strategy for life eloquently advised by Robert Frost, the 1900s wordsmith.

At Global Team Horse Racing (GTH) we have covered the bases by asking: “For survival and growth, what can racing learn from other sports?”

Let’s start with a prime example that comes in the form of wrestling, the niche sporting activity older generations in South Africa adored when our tough-guy mealie farmer, Jan Wilkens, fought his way to the World Title in the late 1970s. But Jan, along with wrestling in its original format, faded from prominence to be replaced by a new heroes and a new format.

What has wrestling got to do with horse racing? Our beloved sport is hovering upon endangerment, like wrestling was at the time of disco music and bell-bottom trousers. We, too, have a way out.

Another example is Formula 1, which was forced to adapt throughout its history. When they introduced turbocharged engines in the 1970s, teams and drivers were sceptical of the new technology and feared that it would make the sport too reliant on engineering rather than driver skill. However, the introduction of turbocharged engines led to some of the most exciting and competitive seasons in Formula 1 history.

Regulations governing the design and construction of Formula 1 cars were changed in the 2000s to promote closer racing. They made several improvements to safety, including the halo cockpit protection system and the mandatory use of head protection for drivers. Formula 1’s revenues have continued to grow, hitting a record 2,5 billion in 2022.

Boxing, Cricket, Tennis, Golf, Athletics!

Boxing has had to revolutionise to make it safer for fighters and more appealing to fans. Weight classes, standardised rules and better medical facilities have helped to reduce the risk of injuries and make the sport more credible.

Soccer enhanced its appeal to a global audience. They introduced video assistant referees (VAR), changing the way the game is officiated, and the use of goal-line technology has made the game fairer. Fifa has made efforts to increase transparency in the game and reduce corruption. It is a more trustworthy sport today, and immensely popular around the world.

When the International Cricket Council (ICC) considered a new format of limited-overs cricket, known as Twenty20 (T20) in 2003, it faced some resistance from traditionalists who felt that the game was being altered without good reason. They argued that the new format was promoted purely for commercial reasons. Another change that faced opposition was the introduction of the DRS (Decision Review System), designed to help umpires make more accurate decisions. It was met with resistance from some players and fans who felt that it was too complicated and that it could slow down the pace of the game.

Also introduced was the World Test Championship (WTC) in 2019, which aimed to create a league-style tournament for Test cricket. While the WTC was generally well received, some players and fans expressed concerns that it could lead to an over-emphasis on white-ball cricket, and that it could take away from the traditional format of Test cricket. But despite the negative reactions to some of the changes made, they have generally been seen as a positive development for the sport, helping to improve its popularity, while also bringing in new revenue streams and attracting new fans.

Tennis authorities had to make several changes to make their game more accessible and engaging to a wider audience. Tiebreakers, electronic line calling, and allowing coaching during matches have made the sport more fan-friendly. All of those against purist disagreements.

In Golf, we've seen leading player Rory McIlroy and others speak out in the past year against the upstart LIV Golf League. But Rory, in his most recent media interview, admitted that the threat to the PGA from its Saudi-backed rival forced the PGA Tour to aggressively address its "antiquated system" in a way that benefits players on all of the top tours.

Sports, along with technology and the media landscape, is forever evolving. The ones that have revolutionised their rules, format, and approach to appeal to a wider audience, have not only survived but also thrived. Ultimately, innovation is the bottom line in a competitive landscape. GTH is cutting-edge, disruptive, and designed for the new participants and stakeholders required to keep horse racing sustainable. It's a no-brainer!

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