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CHRB NEWS RELEASE

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HISTORICAL SETTING FOR CHRB MEETING

FRESNO, CA – When the California Horse Racing Board meets for the first time in its 70-year history in Fresno this coming Thursday, prominent thoroughbred horseman John Harris will have fulfilled a promise he made to himself long ago to one day bring the CHRB meeting to the Big Fresno Fair. As a member of the Board since 2000 and chairman for the last two years, he finally was in a position to make it happen.

Harris, who grew up in the Fresno area, had been frustrated that one of the oldest racetracks in California had never hosted a meeting of the state agency that regulates horse racing in the state.

Fresno has a rich history. The central San Joaquin Valley was a budding agricultural giant in 1882, when a group of Fresno businessmen, growers, and ranchers met to form the Fresno Fair Ground Association. The first Fresno Fair opened the following year, and featured a five-day race meet, a few small produce displays, and several head of livestock. Betting was legal and mostly on an individual basis, although "pool selling" was mentioned in newspapers the next year. Modest as it was, it was huge success; only five years later, a grandstand was added to the fairgrounds. Agricultural, industrial and commerce followed in the early 1900s.

The first grandstand was completed two weeks before the 1888 fair opened. The current grandstand was built in 1938, and since then, four stages of expansion have taken place. Repairs were made in 1946 after extensive damage from wartime use of the grounds by the Army. The mezzanine was enlarged in 1960, and an enclosed racing press box and three new box seat sections were completed in 1961.

During the 1970s, Fresno made major capital improvements to the grandstand, and in recent years constructed a new paddock and jockeys room.

Early racing at the fair matched horses from farms throughout the Valley. The Fresno Fair Grounds Association would put up a small purse, but the winning owner earned more money with so-called "friendly wagers." The Fresno-Madera District Fair allowed the first pari-mutual wagering in 1935, with only two pari-mutuel windows and one cashiers window.

The major race of the current meet is the \$50,000 Bulldog Stakes. As Fresno is the home city of the Fresno State Bulldogs, red-wave pride will be very much in evidence October 16 when the one-mile race highlights the racing program.

Seven decades after California voters passed a Constitutional Amendment establishing pari-mutuel wagering in the state, and created the CHRB to regulate the industry, the Board will hold its regular monthly meeting at the fairgrounds. Discussions of procedures in place for determining jockey weights and a proposed emergency rule for heightened security will be the principal items of business.

Harris said he placed the weights issue on the agenda because “it is critical that each and every fan truly understands how much weight the horse he wagers on is carrying relative to other horses and that we provide a transparency in our system that is above reproach. I don’t know if the allegations of improprieties in New York are correct, but we need to be sure our system in California is bulletproof.”

Harris added, “We need to discuss ways we can better involve the public in the weight verification either by placing the scale in a public area or by having a live shot of the scale on a video monitor. This particular discussion will not focus on the overall health issues involved with the jockey weights, though that is another important issue that we will address at another time.”

The proposed emergency regulation would affirm the CHRB’s authority to heighten surveillance in the stable areas, including the use of audio-video equipment and the designation of security stalls.

Harris commented, “I think each barn area should have some video surveillance, at the very least comparable to the average convenience store, and I am very disappointed that the industry has not moved more quickly to use technology to enhance security.”

The CHRB meeting in Fresno represents a homecoming of sorts for Harris, who owns and operates Harris Ranch in nearby Coalinga. When Harris was 7 years old, he went to the Fresno fair with his grandfather, J.A. Harris, who lived just a block from the fair on what was then a small farm.

Many people are attracted to the Ferris wheel and other amusements at the fair, while others participate in livestock contests sponsored by 4-H, but for the elder Harris and his grandson, the big attraction was horse racing at the fair. Fresno was the first racetrack the younger Harris ever visited – his first exposure to what would become a life-long hobby and vocation, and an extension of his major agricultural and livestock interests at Harris Farm.

“I mainly remember that we picked three winners in a row, just from looking at the horses in the post parade, and I thought this must be an easy game,” recalled Harris. “Eventually I learned it is not an easy game, but I still love it.”

More than 50 years after that first visit to the Fresno fair, Harris now owns about 300 racehorses, including five or six that will be racing at the 11-day Big Fresno Fair race meet that runs from October 5 through October 16. He also is one of California’s largest thoroughbred breeders. He owns 60 broodmares and stands 10 stallions at his farm. He operates a training center, which prepares horses to run at all of the state’s racetracks, including Fresno. In 2005 he has raced homebreds Alphabet Kisses, High Standards, and El Don to stakes victories.

“I am living proof that the fair meets bring people into racing who otherwise would never been exposed to the sport,” said Harris. “I doubt if my grandfather ever drove to Santa Anita or any

of the other major racetracks in the state to see races. The local fair was and still is a big deal, and it's only natural for some folks to drop in and watch some races even if they don't know anything about horse racing. Some become fascinated with a great sport and business that has a wonderful heritage.

“I've won Grade I races at the major tracks and I've won bottom-level claiming races at Fresno and the other fairs, and I still get excited about all of them. When I win at Fresno, maybe 20 friends end up in the winner's circle with me for the photo.”

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