THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Column: Maryland is trying to save horse racing. So why does it all feel so chaotic?

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6/10/2026 1:15 p.m. EDT

Jockey Sheldon Russell rides Taj Mahal (1) to an early lead out of the gate during the 151st Preakness Stakes at Laurel Park. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

The victory by Kentucky Derby winner Golden Tempo on Saturday in the Belmont Stakes after bypassing the Preakness Stakes spotlights the precarious condition of the sport in the state.

For the third time in the past five years, handlers of the Kentucky Derby winner opted to skip the second leg of horse racing's Triple Crown, continuing the diminishment of Maryland's signature sporting event.

Asked to consider in hindsight her passing on the opportunity to compete for racing's Triple Crown by skipping the Preakness, Golden Tempo's trainer Cherie DeVaux said: "It's not something I'm gonna think about. We made our decision and he won today, and we're gonna be happy about that."

As a new Pimlico Race Course is built in Baltimore, the one race in the state that anyone beyond hardcore fans cares about is in danger of losing its cachet and relevancy.

In the past, the Preakness routinely drew crowds topping 100,000 at Pimlico, which last year was torn down and is being redeveloped. This year, attendance was capped at just 4,800 when the race was held at Laurel Park.

Further clouding the Maryland racing picture is the confusing and in-flux ownership of Preakness. Churchill Downs Inc., which hosts the Kentucky Derby, purchased control of the race's intellectual property, while the state, which took control of Maryland racing last year, maintains operational rights. The state can match the $85 million deal and is weighing its options.

This arrangement is compounded by questions about the costs of building a new Pimlico, how focused it will be on racing as opposed to a community events center, as well as the state's unsettled purchase of Laurel Park as a future training center.

And last week, Gov. Wes Moore elevated real estate developer Nicole Earle to head of the Maryland Racing Commission.

Earle, president and CEO of Dominion Real Estate and Dominion Community Development Corp., is considered a community leader in the Park Heights neighborhood that is home to Pimlico. She has served on the racing commission for a year, and replaces steeplechase owner and breeder George Mahoney, who will remain on the commission.

"Ms. Earle's extensive expertise in development finance and community investment makes her uniquely suited for this role," Maryland Department of Labor Secretary Portia Wu said in a prepared statement. "She brings a vital perspective that ensures Maryland racing remains an economic engine that uplifts local communities and that we uphold the integrity of this Maryland tradition."

Yet, what, exactly, is the role of the Maryland Racing Commission, the sport's regulatory authority responsible for overseeing track management decisions, when its boss — the state — runs the show?

The Moore administration has taken away all but token power from its once-powerful commission. It also has skewed the commission membership away from expertise and background in day-to-day requirements of the sport, such as relations with horsemen, jockey infractions, drug and medication violations and administrative issues.

At the Maryland Racing Commission's most recent monthly meeting on May 13, a simmering dispute over voting rights of members publicly bubbled over between a group of veteran trainers and their leadership in the Maryland Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association. The commission listened to comments from both sides and then declined to ask either side a single question.

Changes to the nine-member commission are rapidly being made.

Beyond the elevation of Earle to chairwoman, thoroughbred racehorse owner Konrad Wayson and former jockey Terry West have been removed from their positions on the commission. Wayson was widely considered one of its most knowledgeable members.

The state's harness racing industry is well represented on the commission with owner-breeder Tammy Lafferty and incoming member Jack Burke, who is the general manager of a Chesapeake City standardbred breeding farm.

The thoroughbred side is shorter on day-to-day regulatory experience and authority. The governor's recent commission appointee, the Retired Racehorse Project's long-time executive director Kirsten Green, readily admitted that beyond her focus on the well-being of horses after their racing careers ended, her involvement with racing wasn't "anything more than [as] a fan."

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Member Jennifer Wright is a thoroughbred veterinarian. Bobby Lillis, a former jockey once called "the mayor of the backstretch" for his work as head of the Maryland Horsemen's Assistance Foundation, has extensive experience in most facets of racing. The final two members are Shawn Wright, the former chairwoman of the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights and an attorney specializing in white-collar criminal defense, and Ellen Zavian, a pioneering sports agent and attorney, who has worked in the NFL and was general counsel at USA Lacrosse.

On June 1, 2023, the administration cut the commission all but completely out of the loop of decision-making when it created the Maryland Thoroughbred Racetrack Operating Authority to guide the sport into the future.

Within weeks, Maryland Racing Commission Chairman Mike Algeo resigned from the board, telling the industry website The Racing Biz: "I believe that the role of the Maryland Racing Commission has been diminished significantly, and has been emasculated significantly. And it's just not what it was when I started in 2016."

Algeo, a retired circuit court judge appointed by Gov. Larry Hogan, had no racing experience when he joined the commission. His exit followed that of three long-time members with deep institutional knowledge — thoroughbred breeders David Hayden and Tom Bowman and standardbred farm owner Thomas Winebrener.

Instead of a steady, authoritative hand, the Maryland Thoroughbred Racetrack Operating Authority created by Moore displayed strategic incompetence and perhaps even malfeasance, with no commission oversight.

A report by the state's Office of Legislative Audit last fall delivered a stinging indictment: The MTROA had failed to document a $10 million advance it had given to the Maryland Jockey Club, the operating entity of the racetracks, and had handed out $1.9 million in consulting contracts with no formal bids or concrete objectives.

In May 2025, the MTROA authorized the $4.48 million purchase of Shamrock Farm in Woodbine to serve as thoroughbred racing's new training center. The grounds were later found to be unsuitable to build a training track, and the state now must figure out what to do with the property.

MTROA Chairman Greg Cross had called Shamrock "the perfect site." The property was owned by Thomas Rooney — a board member of the MTROA.

When the state purchased Pimlico and the Preakness Stakes in 2024, it inexplicably allowed intellectual property rights — the race's name, logos, trademarks, everything related to marketing, hence of value — to be separated from the race itself and kept by 1/ST Racing.

Those rights were recently purchased by Churchill Downs Inc. To access the rights to the name of its own race, the state must pay a base fee of $3 million each year, rising 2.5% each year, and 2% of the total wagering handle of both Black-Eyed Susan and the Preakness Stakes race cards. In 2025, that total handle came to $138,580,314, meaning a payout of another $2.77 million.

In the wake of bailing on Shamrock, the Maryland Stadium Authority, which is overseeing the Pimlico rebuild, entered into an agreement to purchase Laurel from 1/ST Racing for $48.5 million. Last month, the General Assembly's Legislative Policy Committee put a pause on the purchase, with both Senate President Bill Ferguson and State Treasurer Dereck Davis casting doubt on the state pouring more money into what many see as a dying sport.

It's hard to remember a time when state politicians talked down racing the week before the state's biggest sporting event.

In the past, the state racing commission, which next meets June 10 at Laurel Park, would have provided expert guidance to the state — or a private racetrack owner — on how to navigate these unfamiliar waters and have a final say in the approval of deals.

Last year for the first time, the state also created a nine-member Maryland Jockey Club board of directors with the stated goals of developing greater strategic planning and policy development. It will be interesting to see how the MJC and its board respond to an upcoming effort from the Maryland Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association to permit a single trainer to enter three horses in routine races called "overnight races" as long as the contest has a minimum of six unique betting interests.

This effort, purported to help fill races with few entries, favors powerful stables with many horses to draw on. It also has the strong potential to undermine the perception of racing's integrity among the betting public. When a heavily favored horse finishes behind one or even two long shots from the same trainer, it creates a major whiff of conspiracy.

In 2001, outrage arose when the Maryland Racing Commission approved a rule to permit two uncoupled betting interests from the same trainer for the first time.

If the Maryland Jockey Club backed the horsemen's effort, would the racing commission members even feel like they had the authority to resist it for the integrity of the game? What experience will the members with real estate and veterinary backgrounds draw on when deciding whether to approve this seismic change?

With the commission's expertise largely sidelined, the state is making critical decisions about the future of racing and its operations without independent oversight.