

Hold Your Horses!

THE CHURCH has claimed a major victory in its Sunday racing lobby, after it was revealed yesterday that the horse racing industry was thrown into a tailspin on the issue.

News broke late afternoon that Caymanas Track Limited's (CTL) Off-Track Betting parlours (OTBs) were barred from opening this Sunday - the first of two scheduled race meets for the year - on the directive of Cabinet, a direct result of pressure from the Church.

In addition, no broadcast, radio or television will be allowed for Sunday racing, effectively killing the hope of making Sunday a more lucrative day for racing, replacing Wednesday sales which have been flagging for years.

The Reverend Silburn Kerr of Abundant Life Christian Church in the Portmore Town Centre Plaza, located almost two miles from Caymanas Park, last night all but said it was an act of God, which now threatens to send Sunday racing stumbling from the starting gate.

"Remember, there's power in prayer," Kerr told The Gleaner with almost an air of triumph.

"You pray then do the practical things, such as lobby, call talk shows and write letters to the editor.

"God talks through these means. We pray and do believe God is listening. It's all about faith," he added.

"A lot of people already don't go to church and we're providing them with another opportunity not to. The prayers of the Christians in this country have helped us through difficult times," he pointed out.

Threatening to sue

While Kerr was claiming a moral and religious victory, describing Jamaica as a country with "a strong Christian culture" and stating that it was "an affront" to add another day of worship as a raceday, Barbara Boreland-Williams, president of the Off-Track Betting Parlours Association of Jamaica, was threatening to take CTL to court for what will be loss of revenue.

OTBs, private entities operating under the CTL franchise, are responsible for 70 per cent of the track's sales and earn commission of 5.5 per cent.

Boreland-Williams' complaint is that CTL altered its racing calendar, from 82 to 80 racedays, dropping five Wednesday meets, two this month, including today's, and three in December - to facilitate Sunday racing for which her members have been declared very late non-starters.

"We're speaking to our attorneys with a view to see what will happen. We can't say if we will be seeking an injunction against CTL for us to sell," she added, responding to sources who hinted that would have been the route taken by the OTB association.

"For argument's sake, we would've earned \$100,000 on Wednesdays. Now we won't earn anything. We're fed up with CTL. We should've got an increase two years ago. Instead of trying to make things better we're hearing this."

Boreland-Williams said on Monday CTL personnel were calling up OTBs encouraging them to open on Sunday.

"Tuesday at 1 p.m. we were told that we would not be allowed to open," she added.

CTL director Christopher Armond yesterday described the new developments as "a disappointment".

"We wanted to have our OTBs open but we have to go along with the directives from Government," he said.

Revenue loss

Armond said plans would go ahead for Sunday's meet without the participation of OTBs, a significant revenue loss to the company, as well as expected media frenzy.

"The horses were prepared with that day in mind and entries close tomorrow."

As far as the December 13 meet is concerned, Armond said its fate would be decided after a board meeting this morning.

Senator Arthur Williams, the minister in charge of racing matters, was mum on the issue last night, pointing The Gleaner to this morning's meeting.

"Tomorrow I can confirm, deny or explain it better," he said, when asked whether the December meet would still go ahead in the prevailing conditions.