

HARNESS RACING

Records requested as scandal widens

Chris Roots

TWO trainers were handed letters requesting their phone records by Harness Racing NSW yesterday as the probe into alleged swabbing irregularities - which resulted in harness racing stewards Paul O'Toole and Matthew Bentley tendering their resignations on Monday - widened.

Trainer-driver Mitchell Reese confirmed he received a letter, while it is believed trainer Michael Russo was given a similar document. "I have nothing to hide," Reese said. "If they want my phone records they can have them."

The *Herald* understands the investigation centres on the departed stewards not taking pre- and post-race swabs from certain horses in particular races. When informed of the allegations on Monday, O'Toole and Bentley tendered their resignations.

The investigation into O'Toole and Bentley lasted for more than six months after a member of the stewards' panel openly questioned their integrity. O'Toole was the official starter at many meetings and had the responsibility of choosing horses which were to be swabbed pre-race.

The chief executive of Harness Racing NSW, Sam Nati, has personally taken charge of the investigation, along with the

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sport's new regulatory manager Reid Sanders. "This is an extremely sobering occurrence for the industry - there is no getting away from that fact," Nati said.

"This investigation is ugly and there will be fallout. However, there is no stone being left unturned. As sad and angry as everybody is right now, this should give participants the confidence that Harness Racing NSW is doing everything in its power to ensure a level playing field."

Bentley had been considered a rising star on the stewards' panel with a background in law, while O'Toole was veteran steward and starter.

The anger was clear at Menangle yesterday but officials were reluctant to talk about the situation. Nati confirmed "further letters [were] sent to trainers" yesterday but would not confirm how many. It is believed to be eight.

The corruption is believed to be endemic within the sport and was not isolated. It is believed one trainer almost exclusively nominated horses for meetings where Bentley was rostered to be chairman of stewards.

NSW Harness Racing chief steward Bill Cable said he was disappointed in the conduct of O'Toole and Bentley.

Racing NSW chief steward Ray Murrthy rang Sanders and offered "whatever help they needed". "It is a terrible matter," Murrthy said. O'Toole and Bentley could not be contacted by the *Herald* last night.

Queen's Cup winner Moudre has broken down and will not race this spring. Warrnambool trainer Ciaran Maher confirmed the six-year-old had suffered a tendon injury and would be off the scene for a year.

Maher was excited about Moudre's spring prospects after he showed so much promise last season. "He probably aggravated the tendon when he trialed the other day," Maher said.

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