

Media Release

HRNZ outlines proposed 2026/27 Group & Feature Racing Calendar

Harness Racing New Zealand (HRNZ) has released its 2026/27 Group & Feature Racing Calendar, which has been developed following a comprehensive review of the national feature racing programme.

The draft Calendar also sets out the proposed stakes for the industry's premier races. In developing the proposals, careful consideration has been given to aligning investment with the funding currently available, while protecting the races that define New Zealand harness racing.

HRNZ continues to work constructively with New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing and TAB New Zealand to secure the most effective and sustainable funding structure for the equine codes. The proposed calendar and stakes remain subject to final funding arrangements, and HRNZ Board approval.

The draft seeks to provide strong aspirational opportunities throughout the season while maintaining a financially sustainable programme and acting in the best long-term interests of harness racing.

While the proposed calendar retains the industry's premier racing carnivals and iconic races, a number of refinements are proposed to improve scheduling, strengthen racing pathways, and better complement the overall flow of the season. Wherever possible, races are proposed to be repositioned to create clearer progression for horses through the grades and into New Zealand's major features.

The proposed road to Cup Week has been refined, with a number of feature races repositioned to improve programme functionality. Due to the temporary unavailability of Motukarara, the D G Jones Banks Peninsula Trotting Cup is proposed to be staged at Addington on 25 September, alongside the inaugural Chairman's Handicap, a new \$25,000 pacing feature introduced to permanently fill a long-standing programming gap. In Auckland, the City of Sails Trot is proposed to return for the first time since 2012, providing Open Class trotters with a dedicated lead-in to the spring carnival.

Further enhancements continue into October, with the Southern Mares Classic moving to Addington's 9 October meeting, joining an already strong programme featuring the Flying Stakes and Harness Million juvenile features.

Following the centenary celebrations of both events in 2025, the Kaikoura Cup and South Bay Trotters Cup return to their standard stake levels for the 2026 running, concluding what was a one-year enhancement to recognise the milestone occasion.

Both races remain integral components of the traditional build-up to New Zealand Cup Week and continue to play an important role within the early spring feature programme.

The Friday night preceding Cup Week has been significantly strengthened following the success of the corresponding meeting in 2025. The New Zealand Trotting Oaks is proposed to move to this meeting, separating it from the New Zealand Trotting Derby following extensive industry feedback and allowing quality fillies the opportunity to contest both races. The programme is further enhanced by the introduction of the New Zealand Pacing Derby Prelude and New Zealand Trotting Derby Prelude, replacing the former Ascent and Velocity while creating more meaningful pathways into Derby Day.

The New Zealand Cup Carnival itself continues to showcase the very best of New Zealand harness racing, with the New Zealand Trotting Cup to be run for a stake of \$800,000, while the Dominion Trot will carry a stake of \$400,000. Both races remain the pinnacle of their respective disciplines and headline a feature programme that continues to attract the sport's elite performers.

Show Day also would include the inaugural Group 2 Adore Me, a mares' Free For All, while the newly established Metropolitan Tiara series provides valuable opportunities for mares rated up to R45 through three qualifying heats leading into Cup Week.

The summer programme has also been refined. Harness 5000 is proposed to move forward to 6 December at Ashburton to reduce clashes with the southern feature programme, while Auckland's pathway into New Year's Eve is proposed to be reshaped to provide a clearer progression through the Franklin Cup, I Can Doosit Handicap Trot, Greenlane Cup and City of Auckland Free For All, culminating in the Auckland Cup and National Trot on 31 December.

Canterbury's January and February programme has been refreshed, with the Summer Free For Alls and Premier Mares brought together on 29 January before a dedicated Premier Night on 12 February featuring the Breeders Stakes, Fred Shaw Memorial and Superstars Championship. Ashburton's new feature meeting on 21 February would showcase short-course racing, including the inaugural Ashburton Pacers and Trotters Free For Alls, Ashburton Mares Sprint and a reimagined Sapling Stakes, with automatic qualification into the Young Guns Finals for the leading filly and colt or gelding.

The Northern Lights Carnival has also been refined to provide greater structure and progression. The opening night on 12 March features the Caduceus Club Classic, Founders Cup, Northern Trotting Oaks and the inaugural Idle Scott, before all three Harness Million Finals are reunited on 19 March. Auckland's 25 March meeting would

become a key feature of the carnival, highlighted by the Taylor Mile, Lyell Creek, Delightful Lady Classic and Autumn Mares Sprint.

Eight days later, Cambridge is proposed to host a refreshed Night of Champions. Following the proposed discontinuation of The Race and The Trot, the meeting would feature the inaugural Waikato Pacing Championship and Waikato Trotting Championship, both run under Group 1 Free For All conditions for stakes of \$100,000. The carnival has also been deliberately restructured to ensure races progress logically through sprint, middle-distance and staying features, creating a clearer and more engaging championship series.

The Autumn Carnival is proposed to conclude with two elite nights at Alexandra Park. The first, on 16 April, features the Sires Stakes 3YO Trot, Anzac Cup, Roy Purdon Memorial, Charles Roberts NISBA Stakes, Sires Stakes 3YO Fillies Final and Alabar Classic. A fortnight later, the season reaches its climax with one of the strongest race nights on the calendar, headlined by six Group 1 features - the Northern Derby, Northern Oaks, Northern Trotting Derby, Messenger Championship, Rowe Cup and Easton Light Classic, alongside the Northern Breeders Stakes.

The proposed 2026/27 Group & Feature Racing Calendar reflects HRNZ's commitment to ensuring New Zealand's feature racing programme continues to evolve, while protecting recognised racing pathways and the prestige of the country's premier carnivals and races.

Throughout this process, HRNZ will remain focused on acting in the best long-term interests of harness racing, its participants, clubs and communities.

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