

Back to the track

HORSE RACING: 'Everybody is in an upbeat position' as 112th season opens in Fort Erie

By RAY SPITERI, REVIEW STAFF WRITER
May 3, 2009

Excitement among the fans was clear to see. Relief on the faces of horse owners, trainers and jockeys easy to read.

Thoroughbreds galloped out of the gates at the Fort Erie Race Track over the weekend to open the 112th season of racing at the historic border oval.

"You can bet online, but there's nothing like seeing live horse racing," said Mike Allenby, a fan of the sport for the past 40 years.

The 59-year-old Fort Erie resident and an estimated 3,500 other enthusiasts came out to the Catherine Street facility Saturday to watch an event many thought would not come.

An off-season of layoff notices and fears of the track's impending closure made it look as though the track might not open for another campaign. But an 11th-hour deal struck between track owner Nordic Gaming and the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp. changed all that.

The EDTC, an agency of the Town of Fort Erie, is trying to buy the facility for \$35 million and set it up as a not-for-profit entity. The parties continue to work out terms of the sale, financing and develop a business plan.

Track officials and race fans now look forward to a future they hope will focus more attention on the race product than on the politics and negotiating that goes on behind the scenes.



Mike Allenby and George Swan were among the estimated 3,500 fans who visited the Fort Erie Race Track Saturday, as the 112th season at the historic border oval kicked off under sunny skies.

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"The fans are walking around with smiles on their faces, the employees are all joyous and having a great time, and you know, they're back to work," said track media director Daryl Wells. "Everybody is in an upbeat position right now."

Prior to the start of the racing season, Wells said there were more than 500 horses in the backstretch. That's closer to 600 now, and Wells said those involved in the local racing scene hope to see a few more as the weeks go on.

Hamilton resident Bill Chase, who goes to the Fort Erie races "six or seven times" during the season, said there's something about racing in Fort Erie that's unmatched at other tracks.

"I go to Woodbine once in a while, but it's too crowded down there," said the 69-year-old. "Here, it's much more relaxed."

Allenby agrees.

"Woodbine is a great track, too. I lived in Toronto for about 30 years but I used to come here, even when I lived in Toronto. It's so laid back and peaceful."

Bob Asselin, who used to be a horse owner but is now "just a regular spectator," said he could not imagine Fort Erie without horse racing.

"There's some great memories here," he said. "Northern Dancer broke his maiden here."

The 78-day race schedule, with a new 1:10 p. m. post time, continues next weekend featuring a Sunday-Monday-Tuesday race week for the remainder of the season.

The final racing day of the year will be Oct. 27.

"We hope after (this weekend, the fans) keep coming," said Wells. "We've got a strong following of fans that are here every day, no matter what."

"You try to attract new fans. It's tough, though. It's a tough game to get them to come to - a lot of competition out there with the slots, and other forms of gambling, so it's a struggle for us each and every day."

Many spectators were puzzled, however, with a new policy adopted by the track. Wagering is now only being allowed in Canadian currency and two exchange booths have been set up on site.

Over the weekend, buying US\$1 translated into C\$1.17, and selling C\$1.21 got you US\$1. That means an American bettor who arrived with U. S. currency and wanted to convert his Canadian winnings back into American dollars to go home would lose four cents on each Canadian dollar.

Some believe this new policy will make Americans think twice before visiting the track.

"It's not too accommodating for the folks coming across the border, that's for sure," said Allenby. "I mean, not taking American money like they've done for the last 100 plus years -that's crazy."

Wells said management has talked about this policy for a while, and decided to put it into place a week ago.

"It just simplifies things, allows fans to wager on the 20-cent superfectas and other minimum wagers at all the machines," he said. "The policy is, you have to wager on some of these in Canadian currency only, and you know, the percentages of the U. S. to Canadian, the U. S has dropped down."

Wells said he understands there might be some frustration among a section of fans.

"But ... Canadians going over to the U. S., we always have to change our money to go over there. Coming over here, you've got to change your money to go everywhere else, too."

In an effort to get more fans out to the track more often, Wells said there will be new food specials to go alongside the track's full slate of promotional days this season.

"We've got three family days. We've got our deal with ZOOZ again - we'll have them out here for the kids to see the animals. We'll have some more dollar food specials. We'll announce what they are going to be very soon. Most of what we did last year we'll be bringing back this year, and we'll have some surprises."

Also, Fort Erie's races will be shown on the Score television network after a few years absence, which Wells expects will boost off-track wagering. Running a Sunday-to-Tuesday schedule should prove popular with simulcast customers across North America where Mondays and Tuesday tend to have fewer race tracks running for gamblers to pick from.