

## Fort Erie Race Track – Alive and Kicking!

JOHN ROBBINS/Bullet News

Fort Erie Race Track – Alive and Kicking.

That's the new slogan of the 116-year-old border oval with a new lease on life after the provincial Liberal government announced a one-year funding deal that allows the track to open in May for 50 days of live racing.

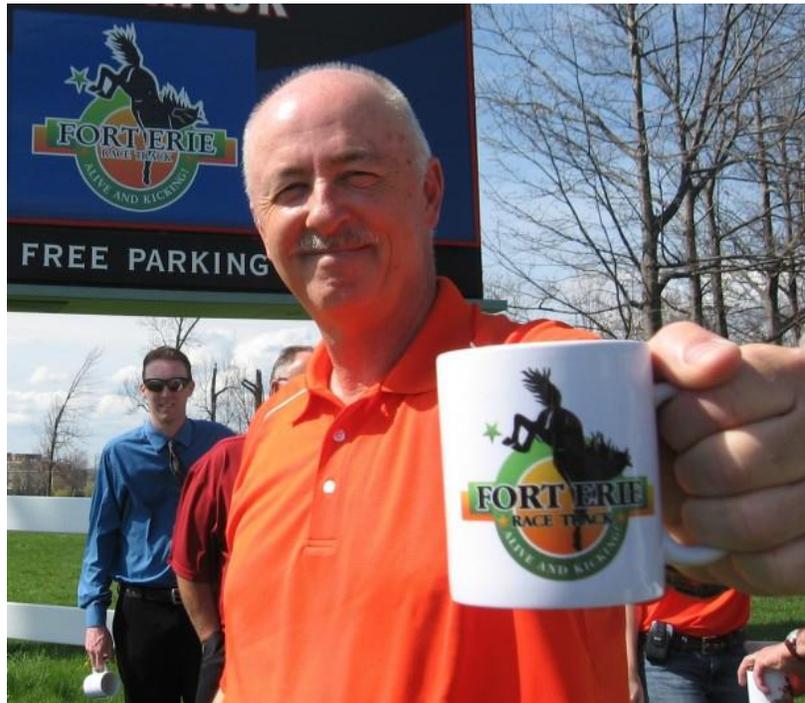
The slogan is part of a new corporate logo, which includes a black horse defiantly thrusting its back legs into the air.

The logo – which adorns large billboard signs outside the race track property and coffee mugs - was unveiled Tuesday afternoon.

It's also printed on some 1,100 T-shirts that will be given out to patrons on opening day.

The person behind the mini rebranding exercise is Elissa Blowe, the track's media and marketing manager.

Blowe says the idea came to her last fall before the last season had ended, when it was anything but certain the track would reopen this year.



Jim Thibert, CEO of the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium, shows off the track's new logo, which can now be found on billboards outside the track, limited edition coffee mugs and 1,100 T-shirts that will be given out on opening day, May 26. Bullet News. Photo by John Robbins

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"It was just one of those slogans that pop into your mind," says Blowe.

The message behind the moniker is simple and direct, adds Blowe: "We're alive and we're going to give you one hell of a season."

The future of horse racing in Ontario was thrown into considerable doubt in the spring of 2012 when the provincial Liberals under former premier Dalton McGuinty announced plans to kill the slots-at-racetracks revenue-sharing program

That program had, since the mid-1990s, seen hundreds of millions of dollars into the horse-racing industry.

At the same time, the province also announced the closure of slot facilities in Fort Erie, Windsor and Sarnia.

The decisions prompted loud protests from the industry, which employs 55,000 to 60,000 people, and from politicians and citizens in communities affected by the potential closure of race tracks and businesses that depend on them.

Under pressure from the NDP, the government agreed to provide transitional funding to help race tracks and others in the industry to adjust to the new reality. A panel was struck to come up with an industry-wide plan moving forward.

It wasn't until late March of this year that some of that transition money was allocated to Fort Erie, thus allowing the track to open this season.

Just how much money any of Ontario's horse tracks have received has not yet been made public.

What is known is the Fort Erie Race Track has less money to work with this year and a much bigger job to do.

The province and the members of the transition panel have made it clear the industry needs to be sustainable and the way to do that is to bring in more customers.

Jim Thibert, chief executive officer of the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium, said despite fewer dollars to spend track staff have been doing an "amazing job" developing a full program of racing, as well as a number of special events.

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Those include a return of the popular Twilight Tuesdays race nights.

The Prince of Wales Stakes, the second jewel in Canada's Triple Crown of thoroughbred racing, will again be a highlight of the season, but even that venerable meet is undergoing some changes aimed at making it more fan friendly and making the track more money.

The Prince of Wales will move from its traditional Sunday slot to a Tuesday – July 30.

First post that evening will be at 4:15 p.m. The time for the running of the Prince of Wales will likely be around 7:30 p.m.

Race track chief operating officer Rick Cowan says the move is designed to bring more locals out to bet that night. The move to a Tuesday will also help boost broadcast signal sales as many competitor race tracks are dark on Tuesday evenings.

Track officials are further hoping moving the Prince of Wales to a Tuesday evening will make it more convenient for American racing fans to come over, given traffic across the border is often lighter on week nights.

Opening day is set for May 26.

The first Twilight Tuesday will be June 4, kicking off a summer of post-race music concerts and partying trackside.

Fort Erie Coun. Rick Shular, who was in attendance at Tuesday's media event, said the success of the track will depend in large measure on support from residents willing not only to attend races and special events but spend money.

"This is the year that we have to step up as a community," Shular said.