

Arlington's on the right track

Richard Duchossois and his Arlington International brass may have lost their recent bid for an Illinois riverboat license, but they're still on solid ground back at the racetrack. One crucial element they certainly don't appear to be in any danger of losing is a prime source of revenue: young urban professionals, more glibly referred to as "yuppies."

Call them what you will, but the 20-something and 30-something set - acknowledged by most tracks to be among the most difficult fan markets to cultivate - is alive and well in visible abundance at this Chicago-area wonderland, cannily situated on the edge of middle-to-upper-class suburbia.

One of the first things I noticed on a recent visit was that happy-looking young adults were everywhere, seeming to make up at least two-thirds of the attendance. Certain that behind all those smiling faces lurked at least one yupster with a bad attitude, I randomly interviewed about three dozen people between

20 and 40.

After determining whether they were repeat visitors (almost everybody was), I

asked them what lures them to Arlington; if they'd ever had a negative experience there (besides leaving with lighter pockets); and on a lovely day like this, if they had a choice between gambling on a downtown-based riverboat or going to the racetrack, which would they prefer?

By far, the top attraction was the high-quality live racing, even for those who engage in little or no wagering. Absolutely everyone said they'd opt to go to the races over playing riverboat games, largely for the same reason: They like the added excitement of live racing. Most said they prefer the challenge of betting intelligently, particularly in such a pleasant outdoor setting.

I never did find a detractor. Every single person I talked to swore they'd never had a bad

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experience at Arlington. That wasn't terribly surprising, given the track's enviable reputation as a model facility

in just about every regard.

What did surprise me was that within this relatively broad sampling of baby-boomers - representing a generation long and widely criticized for being selfish, over-indulged and hard to please - nary a gripe was heard. Being a 30-something myself, I pondered this phenomenon. Few people born between 1953 and 1973 could convincingly protest our "Me Generation" label. Hard to please? Yes, I suppose we are. So, what marketing minds want to know is, when we pursue our pleasures, what exactly are we looking for?

Well, if it's a day out with friends, we want worthwhile entertainment, quality dining at reasonable prices and vibrant yet relaxed surroundings for socializing. If the kids are along, we

seek a place that offers plenty of activities to keep them amused, with ample opportunities to enjoy ourselves at the same time.

In both cases, we'd like to assume we won't get mugged in the parking lot. That's not so much to ask, is it?

Somehow, Arlington's hit upon the right combination of offerings to draw young adults and families in the first place and to keep them coming back.

The live '60s music, picnic tables, petting zoo and pony rides may not be unique concepts by themselves, but combined with first-rate service, the racing features praised by those I spoke with, and perhaps a dash of that inexplicable Arlington allure, they produce a winning formula.

It's a future-saving formula any racetrack on terra firma might strive to emulate.

□ *Anne Lang is the Texas breeding correspondent for Daily Racing Form.*