

Oaklawn Park

Racing fans converge on Hot Springs each year for this track's Racing Festival of the South, highlighted by the Arkansas Derby.

WRITTEN BY ANNE LANG • PHOTOGRAPHED BY CAROL KAELOSON

It's less than an hour past dawn, but unofficially, live racing already has begun at Oaklawn Park in west-central Arkansas. A loose horse, having moments earlier unseated his exercise rider, is maniacally tearing around the track. While a slipped saddle flaps perilously under his belly, he makes two full circuits of the oval with a pair of outriders giving determined chase.

After the first quarter-mile, however, it's obvious that even the hardiest of Quarter Horses are no match for a panicked Thoroughbred. Countless furlongs ahead of his pursuers, the colt darts through the rail gap and charges off toward the stable area—with echoing cries of "loose horse!" following in his wake.

Morning workout traffic, having halted during the episode, resumes its bustling pace. It would take much more than a minor spill to mar this occasion. It's Arkansas Derby Day, and a palpable aura of anticipation spikes the chilled, misty air on this final date of the 1996 Oaklawn season. Incoming exercise riders exchange hurried information with those going out.

"Hey, Mack, where ya headed after this?"

"Arlington. How 'bout you?"

"Iowa."

"Iowa! Lordy, the snow ain't melted up there yet!"

But in Hot Springs, no frozen elements are in sight on this mid-April morning. In fact, the first promise of summer is distinctly evident in the



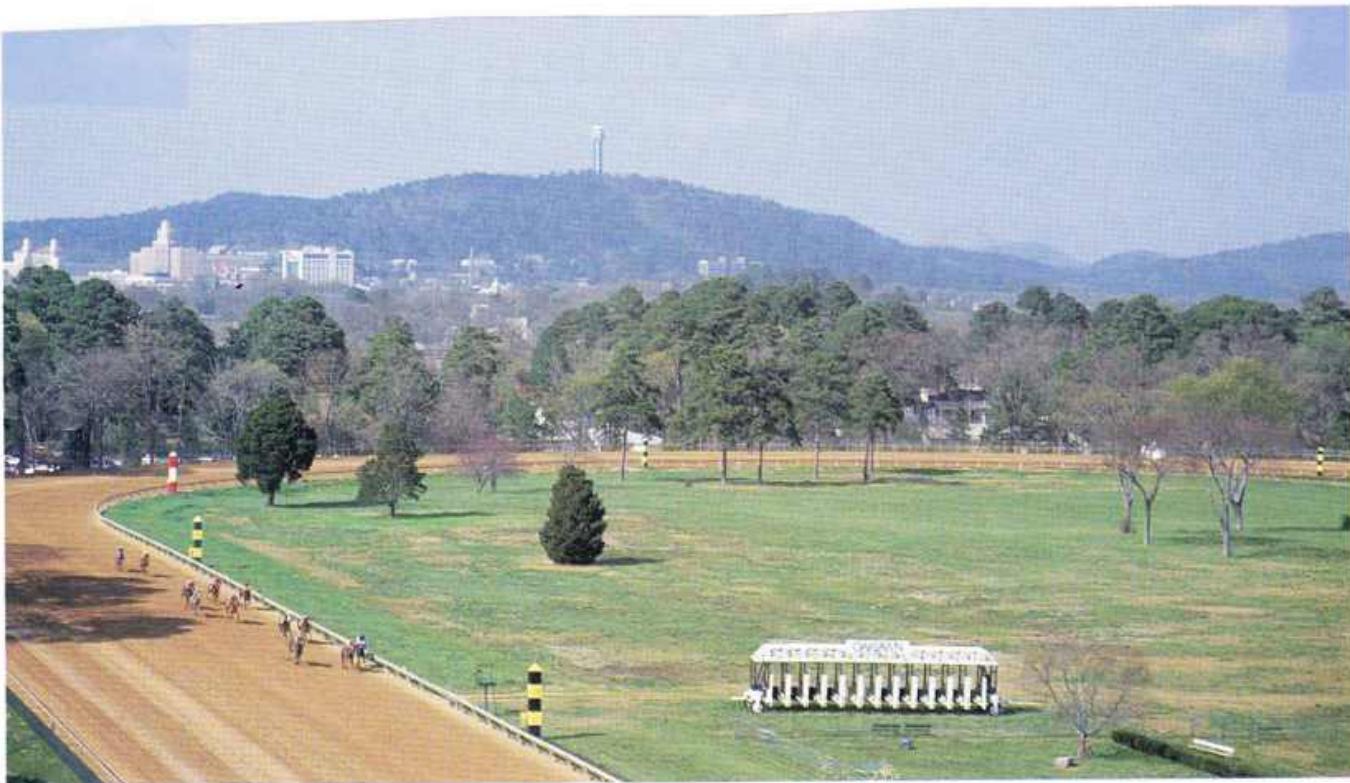
Opposite: Racing dates at Oaklawn in 1997 run January 17 through April 12. **Above:** Bugler Joe Merello calls the horses to the post at Oaklawn Park.

lush green of the infield lawn and the gloriously flowering dogwood trees that border the homestretch rail. It's a picture-perfect setting for a traditional event that debuted exactly 60 years earlier, when Jack Carter's Holl Image bested a field of 15 competing for a \$5,000 purse in the inaugural Arkansas Derby.

Tradition. It is the rock-solid foundation of this quaint Southern plant, which conducted its first race in 1905. On that February afternoon, the mayor of Hot Springs declared a citywide half-holiday, and Oaklawn's gates opened for the track's first crowd—some 3,000 strong. The occasion sparked a love affair between Arkansans and the Thoroughbred that continues unabated today.

True, there were a few interruptions along the way. Beginning in 1907, Oaklawn stood idle for nine years, the victim of political upheaval in the statehouse. The track's original owners, Dan Strut and John Condon, both died during that time. The plant reopened in 1916 under the guidance of new owner Louis Cella. When Cella died two years later, his brother Charles picked up the reins.

Though racing was again suspended during certain years in the 1920s and early 1930s (more state politics), Oaklawn flourished from 1934 on. In addition to Charles Cella, Oaklawn administrators credited with bolstering the track's mid-century progress include W.T. Bishop, J. Sweeney Grant, Eugene



Hot Springs, the resort that surrounds Oaklawn Park, has hosted the likes of Harry Truman, Babe Ruth, Al Capone and Andrew Carnegie. The boyhood home of President Bill Clinton is now one of the town's attractions.

W. Bury and Allan W. "Doc" Lavin.

Charles Cellar died in 1940, and Oaklawn was taken over by his son, John G. The ownership torch has since been handed down to a third generation of the clan. Following John Cellar's untimely demise in 1968, his son, Charles J., became president of Oaklawn—a position the 60-year-old still proudly and energetically maintains as the new millennium looms.

Arguably, the rich history that defines Oaklawn Park is eclipsed by the history of the town that surrounds the track. For centuries, Hot Springs has been world-famous for its namesake waters. Originating as rain, the water filters through a unique rock formation that warms, enriches and purifies it, producing a therapeutic effect on those who soak in it. Daily, more than a million gal-

lons of the mineral-rich hot stuff (average temperature: 143 degrees) flow from 47 springs at the base of Hot Springs Mountain.

It's hard to say whether Hot Springs would be quite so alluring if it didn't have horseracing. Given the longtime existence of Oaklawn Park, there aren't many locals still living who can make a before-and-after comparison, but it's evident that the relationship between track and town is by now symbiotic.

"The people of Hot Springs truly support live racing," insists Bobby Barnett, earner of Oaklawn's leading-trainer title for the past three years. "They welcome the horsemen with open arms, and they're nice to the fans."

Barnett, who conditions horses for John Franks (Oklawn's leading owner for the past three years and owner of 1989 Arkansas Derby winner Dansil), has settled into the same annual Oaklawn tradition practiced by some of the track's earlier well-known trainers, including William Hal Bishop, Henry Forrest, Robert Erwin, David Vance and Marion

Van Berg, who also was an eight-time leading owner.

The track has seen its share of other prominent owners through the years as well—some for the entire season, others for the major stakes—among them Calumet Farm, Claiborne Farm, Dan Lasater, Mrs. Emil Denemark, Ogden Mills Phipps and Loblolly Stable (which campaigned the winners of three Arkansas Derbys and two Oaklawn Handicaps).

Oklawn's current league of predominant owners includes Drs. K.K. and Vilasini Jayayaman, Robert Mitchell and Al Horton. But within that elite group, perhaps no one is more respected than W. Cal Partee. Since buying his first Thoroughbred in the 1950s, Partee has raced nearly 30 added-money winners. They include Grade I stakes winner Big Pistol, still owned by Partee as one of Arkansas' consistently top-ranked stallions. The Partee-owned J.R.'s Pet won the 1974 Arkansas Derby, and his At The Threshold was a multiple Grade I winner.

At The Threshold sired a colt named Lil E. Tee, who, under the

Right: Charles Cella, president of Oaklawn, wants to offer casino gambling at his track. "In order to survive, we must be able to expand our wagering menu," he says. **Middle:** According to trainer Bobby Barnett, "People who live within a 300-mile radius of here don't go anywhere else; they just save their money to come to Oaklawn." **Bottom:** Jockey Ron Ardoin gets a congratulatory hug from trainer Bret Thomas after his win in the 1996 Arkansas Derby aboard Zarb's Magic.

guidance of longtime Oaklawn trainer Lynn Whiting, topped a runner-up finish in 1992's Arkansas Derby with a victory in the Kentucky Derby. But despite Partee's exposure to racing's national spotlight, he says his heart will forever remain at Oaklawn.

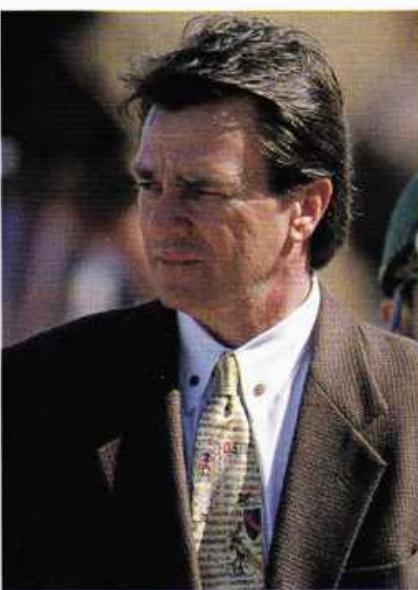
"I just love it here," he declares from his enviable front-row box seat. "The racing at Oaklawn is better than any place I've been, and believe me, I've been all over!"

Oaklawn's party-like atmosphere is a major drawing card for the legions of fans who return each season. But for seven-time Arkansas Breeder of the Year Sharon Hild, who with her husband, Glenn, also operates one of the track's leading stables, Oaklawn is simply a way of life—at least for one third of the year.

The Hilds' shedrow is part of Oaklawn's sprawling stable area that includes barns named for the track's major stakes winners and/or national champions of the past: Alydar, Elocutionist, Swaps, Citation, Kelso, Nodouble, Temperence Hill, Count Fleet, Lady's Secret, Sunny's Halo, etc. At the Snow Chief barn, Hild is found doling out peppermints to several of the 30 horses under her care.

"Oaklawn is home to us," says Hild, whose breeding and training center is also based in Hot Springs, where she and Glenn stand Hurricane Ed, voted Arkansas Stallion of the Year several times. "We've been racing here since 1972."

Other prominent veteran Oaklawn trainers include Larry Robideaux, Bernard Flint, B.L. Littleton, Robert



Holthus and Kenny Smith. Holthus also manages 1996's number-one-ranked stallion, Proper Reality, whom he saddled to win the 1988 Arkansas Derby. Smith is perhaps best known as the trainer of 6-year-old Silver Goblin, winner (in 1995) of Oaklawn's Essex and Razorback handicaps and multiple graded stakes elsewhere.

Luring many of the nation's top trainers, jockeys and horses each year is Oaklawn's Racing Festival of the South, a highly successful concept developed by Charles J. Cella in 1974. Scheduled during the meet's final week (April 5-12), the festival is highlighted by eight major stakes that culminate with the \$500,000 Grade II Arkansas Derby. About 30 additional stakes are conducted throughout the rest of the season, with 11 graded events overall.

On hand this particular week are Jeff Lukas, representing his father D. Wayne's stable with Serena's Song (for the distaff Apple Blossom) and Grindstone (for the Derby), and Ron McAnally, who conditioned Cella's Northern Spur to a 1995 Breeders' Cup Turf win and subsequent Eclipse championship for male grass horse. (Ironically, there is no turf course at Oaklawn, which is regarded as a "winter" facility.)

Two of Wayne Lukas' most notable owners, Bob and Beverly Lewis, are in Hot Springs this weekend to watch their outstanding Serena's Song run in Friday's Grade I Apple Blossom. In a driving rain-storm, the mare would finish a disappointing third. But nothing could dampen the couple's enjoyment of Oaklawn.

"What's special is the enthusiasm of all the people here," a beaming Beverly says. "Not just the fans but the employees, too."

Reflecting the Lewis' attitude, Saturday dawns sunny. Playing host to an equally notable collection of owners associated with today's Derby is the charismatic Cella himself, looking like a male chorus



member from *Guys and Dolls* in a navy suit with wide pinstripes, brown and white saddle oxfords and a fresh red rose in his lapel. Congratulated on having charmed the good-weather gods for the big day's events, Cella throws his arms expansively wide and exclaims: "Yes, they've certainly cooperated, and I'm so pleased!"

What doesn't please Cella, in general, is the growing competition his track must endure from casino gambling in the neighboring states of Mississippi, Louisiana and Missouri. Although on-track, off-track and off-season simulcasting (plus a 1989 reduction in the state's share of the pari-mutuel tax) have helped keep Oaklawn's average daily purse distribution at or above the \$200,000 mark, Arkansas has taken a big hit from the proliferation of out-of-state wagering options—which has been reflected in declining attendance and on-track handle at Oaklawn, the

state's only pari-mutuel facility.

Further, although Cella couldn't have known it on this particular Derby Day in April, a referendum that would have allowed casino gambling at Oaklawn Park and two other Hot Springs locations would be defeated on the November 1996 ballot. Cella was one of the vast majority of Arkansas horsemen who'd pushed for the measure, if only reluctantly.

"I'm not a casino guy," Cella has said, "but I do have a strong dedication to racing. I would never have considered the casino business if it weren't to help racing."

But on Oaklawn's most festive day of the year, Cella's spirits are up. "The casinos have hurt us a great deal, but we're hanging tough. Our tourist base spans an eight-state area, and we're regarded by many as the Saratoga of the South."

Key administrators in Cella's

court include general manager Eric Jackson, racing secretary Pat Pope, operations director Stan Bowker, finance director William Cravens and media relations director Terry Wallace (who's also been Oaklawn's track announcer for 23 years). Like most people, Wallace defines the strong sense of history as the basis for Oaklawn's perseverance in the face of outside gambling forces.

"This is a town that's geared toward tourism, and it was a wide-open gambling town for years," Wallace explains. "There have been race meets here since 1905, so the bettors are certainly well-educated, but you can't replace tradition."

The tradition of starting a meet in January has an advantage in that few major tracks are open so early in the year. Typically, Pope receives 2,600 applications for the backside's 1,600 stalls. The disadvantage is that over the years, despite Arkansas' largely

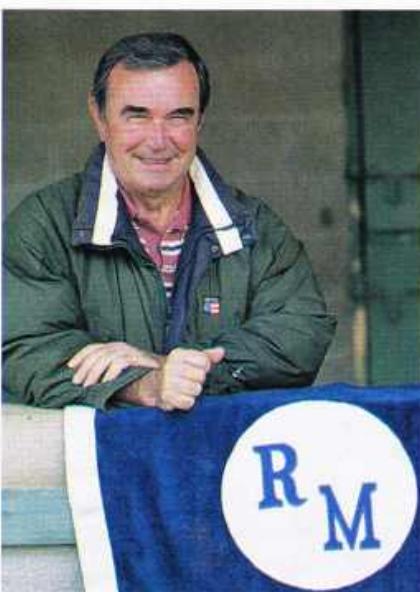
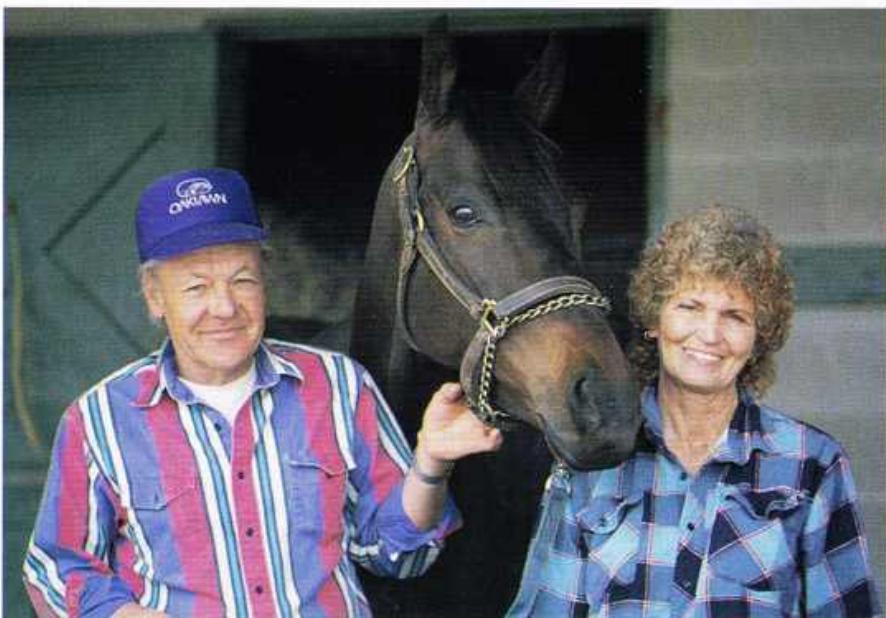
Opposite: Calvin Borel, here on Fresa, won the leading jockey title at Oaklawn Park in 1995. **Right:** Sharon and Glenn Hild base their breeding and training center in Hot Springs. "You can't beat this state's breeders' incentive program," says Sharon. **Below:** For Ron McAnalley, "training here is like a vacation for me, even though I'm working. I also seize every available opportunity to visit the mineral baths!"

moderate climate, Oaklawn has forfeited more than a few days of racing due to heavy snowfall. But it takes a definite "closed" sign to deter the majority of loyal fans.

Representing a new generation of Oaklawn loyalists from the backstretch is 1996's leading jockey, 22-year-old Robby Albarado. The ebullient young man says he feels honored to join the ranks of exceptional reiners who've preceded him at The Spa, including Pat Day, who earned the leading jockey title for an unprecedented 12 consecutive years (1983-94) before being passed by Calvin Borel (who was second to Albarado in the 1996 final standings).

Albarado follows in the footsteps of jockey greats who rode long before him at Oaklawn: Herman Radtke, Earl Sande, Maurice Peters, Johnny Longden, Lyle Whiting, John Lively, Larry Snyder and nearly all of today's top-ranked riders. The list is as long and impressive as the equine standouts (including numerous champions) who've left ghostly hoofprints in the sandy Arkansas loam: Pan Zareta, Exterminator, Elocutionist, Diplomat Way, Gate Dancer, Wild Again, Slew City Slew, Concern, The Wicked North, Best Pal, Paseana, Heavenly Prize, Cigar and countless others.

But the nearly 60,000 fans who have shown up for the 1996 Arkansas Derby are focused solely on the here and now. The crowd is a celebratory one: young and old, singles, couples and families—laid-back and upscale—liberally sprinkled with fancy women's hats to rival those annually seen at Churchill Downs on the first



Saturday in May. Having eagerly contributed to today's overall mutuel handle of \$10 million-plus, they press five rows deep against the rails overlooking Oaklawn's indoor saddling paddock, where a Derby field of 12 is being readied. Several of the country's top riders—Bailey, Perret, Desormeaux, Solis—huddle intently with the likes of trainers Van Berg, Lukas and McAnalley.

The colorful post parade cavorts past the stands under a brilliantly sunny sky. Minutes later the horses break from the gates for the sixtieth running of the historic contest. Despite valiant efforts by Halo Sun-

shine and Grindstone (who ran second by a neck but would win the Kentucky Derby three weeks later), the eventual winner was lightly regarded Zarb's Magic, piloted by Ron Ardo and sent out by Bret Thomas for Texas owner Bill Boorhem. Smiles, handshakes and flowers all around; another Arkansas Derby has come and gone.

With only one race left on the day's card (a 1½-mile event appropriately called The Trail's End), it's time for Oaklawn's traditional season finale. In the middle of the post parade, the 14 starters are pulled up in front of the grandstand while a five-piece band plays "Auld Lang Syne." The Derby Day crowd, which by now includes a large percentage of souls who are less than sober, sings along with maudlin gusto. Unaccustomed to such goings-on, the row of Thoroughbred contenders fidgets and prances.

The race is soon finished, and throngs of happily weary fans head for the exits. As workers sweep up mounds of discarded mutuel tickets on the apron below, champagne corks pop in the press box and in Cella's private VIP lounge next door. Glasses are lifted in solemn tribute to the conclusion of another shining racing season in Hot Springs—and to the certainty of infinite seasons yet to come. □