

TEXAS

Sam Houston busy as opening approaches

By **ANNE LANG**

Special to Daily Racing Form

HOUSTON - Rising like a majestic oasis on the barren, undeveloped landscape in the northwest corner of Texas' largest city is Sam Houston Race Park. Its sprawling grandstand topped with a trio of proud cupolas and its expansive infield lake reflecting the brittle white rays of late-winter sun, it looms suddenly into view, without warning, no doubt causing near-wrecks daily of unsuspecting drivers on the otherwise monotonous Sam Houston Tollway.

Most Houston residents, however, have grown familiar with the facility

that's been under construction for nearly a year. Not only that, they've already embraced it as a landmark. They're scrambling for opening weekend seats. They're scouting the bookstores for handicapping manuals. Sam Houston Race Park is the hottest ticket in town, and it's not scheduled to open until April 29.

Good-neighbor relations aside, currently only those with official business at the 230-acre site are granted passage through the well-manned security entrance to a road that runs parallel to the three-level grandstand and branches off to an administrative parking lot. Though the plant is about 85 percent completed, visitors on walking tours are issued hard hats, and the policy is more a genuine safeguard than a mere formality: With less than six weeks to go, the place is a well-orchestrated beehive of activity.

Workmen by the dozens swarm inside and out, all of them intent on their tasks. Visitors' senses are overwhelmed by flying welders' sparks, whining table saws, swinging cranes, thundering jackhammers and swirling sheetrock dust.

No one is idle at Sam Houston these days, even though track managers insist the project is slightly ahead of schedule. Then again, no one's been idle at this site since the Houston-based MAXXAM Corporation came to the rescue last May with financing for the \$90 million Class 1 track.

A scent of fresh paint lingers inside the administration building, where a labyrinth of offices has become home to the chief executives as well as dozens of support staffers - many of whom were recruited from various tracks throughout the country. The result is an interesting mix of accents, approaches and



SAM HOUSTON GRANDSTAND: Although still under construction, locals are scrambling to get tickets to the April 29 opening.

areas of expertise, but the brimming enthusiasm uniting all the employees is tangible.

"These people have been incredible," said general manager Jim Murphy, shaking his head in wonder as he relaxed in the standard pre-opening uniform of jeans and rolled-up sleeves. "They've all worked so hard, putting in long days, long nights and weekend hours, without a complaint. Even the construction guys, who've been on the job seven days a week, seem to have enormous pride in what they're doing. I think everybody realizes they're helping to create Texas history."

Racing secretary Randy Soth recently completed the unenviable job of paring 4,500 applications for Sam Houston's 1,200 stalls. He summarized his first big challenge: "It

was like trying to put a four-inch peg in a one-inch hole. And my telephone still rings constantly."

Soth allocated space to a host of nationally prominent trainers whose charges will compete for \$150,000 in daily purses. His job will take on an added dimension when those horses begin arriving on April 1.

And it's the horses, Murphy emphasizes, who will be the stars of the show.

"We want to do all we can for the fans, of course," he said. "And we're confident that we're planning everything we can do to bring people back. But we really want the focus to be on the horses. Texans have a longtime affinity with the horse, and it ought to be a natural attraction. We just hope all this pent-up demand will carry us through the first 45 days."



SAM HOUSTON
RACE PARK

A rough trip to the present

Racing makes a comeback after a long struggle

By ANNE LANG
and
ALLEN BOGAN

Special to Daily Racing Form

Texans always have been fond of horseracing. And the first-known evidence of that fact appeared in Houston more than 150 years ago.

That's when the Houston Jockey Club was formed, and on Nov. 26, 1838, the first organized racing began at a track in that city — just two years after the creation of the Republic of Texas.

By the mid-1880s, racing flourished nearly everywhere in the Lone Star State. Some believe that Texas's first track was near San Saba, in the community of Harkeyville, named after Riley Harkey, land baron of that era. Harkey reportedly brought the first actual thoroughbred stock to Texas in order to promote "high-class" racing.

Other early-day sites for racing were reported to be in New Braunfels, where the Comal County Fair was organized in 1892; also Boerne, Junction, Brady, Burns City and numerous other towns. Dallas had its popular Fair Park track, located on the grounds of what later became the State Fair of Texas. Tracks also existed at various sites in and around Fort Worth before the turn of the century.

In the early 1900s, racing was becoming so popular throughout the nation that many states began to legalize the sport, much to the displeasure of "moralists." In Texas, a bill legalizing racing was approved by the legislature in 1905. However, church groups continued to protest the bangtail activities, and in 1909 horse betting again was prohibited in Texas.

Two decades after racing's popularity had plunged to the depths, national sentiment against gambling began to change, and state after state started to reestablish the sport, this time with pari-mutuel wagering in

vogue. In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, Texas was one of nine states that legalized horseracing and pari-mutuel wagering. But the way the racing legislation was passed was both crude and smooth. It shouldn't have worked, but it did.

The governor of Texas at that time was Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson. She was being advised by her husband, former Texas Gov. James B. Ferguson, who had been impeached in 1917 following numerous scandals. Both Fergusons were known as liberals, and during Mrs. Ferguson's previous term, Prohibition had been repealed in Texas.

On the final day of the 1933 legislature, a joint conference committee of House and Senate members tacked a surprise amendment onto the end of the semi-annual appropriations bill that called for funding all state activities for the next two years. That amendment, in essence, legalized pari-mutuel wagering in the Lone Star State and established a racing commission.

The bottom line was that the legislature could not veto the racing amendment without vetoing the entire bill. Gov. Ferguson refused to call a special session, so the legislature had to approve the entire measure or the state would cease to operate for the next two years due to lack of funding.

Opposing House and Senate members were livid, throwing papers into the air and at proponents of the amendment. "Those in the know propped their boots on their desks and smirked," wrote Kent Demaret in his book, "Baptists and Bangtails."

Four major thoroughbred tracks were established in the state, all in metropolitan areas. Most widely acclaimed was the lavish Arlington Downs, built four years earlier by Col. W.T. Waggoner — a millionaire Wise County cattleman who is considered by many to be the most influential man in early Texas racing history. The other major tracks were Epsom Downs in Houston, Alamo Downs near San Antonio and Fair Park at Dallas.

On Oct. 19, 1933, a crowd of more than 12,000, including Gov. Ferguson, U.S. Vice President James

Nance Garner, Postmaster General James A. Farley, movie stars and local dignitaries enjoyed the first day of pari-mutuel racing at Arlington Downs. On Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 27, 1933, an estimated 25,000 attended opening-day festivities at Epsom Downs. And before the 1933 season had ended at Arlington Downs (located in Tarrant County, about halfway between Dallas and Fort Worth), crowds of 25,000 to 40,000 were packing the Colonel's racecourse on Saturdays.

In the spring of 1934, tracks opened in Dallas and San Antonio. Alamo Downs was located about eight miles west of San Antonio, but the Fair Park plant was situated on the site of the former Dallas track that had attracted racegoers to the State Fairgrounds in bygone days. Texas-bred horses were featured at the Dallas site.

With half-mile tracks also established in Galveston, Seguin and Rusk, the total of purses offered at all Texas tracks in 1934 was \$854,520, which the *Thoroughbred Record* magazine reported was the fifth-highest in the nation (trailing only New York, Illinois, Maryland and Michigan).

The Texas Derby, held each spring at Arlington Downs from 1934-1937, became one of the Southwest's premier races and attracted entrants from all over the nation. Roman Soldier, who on April 20 won the 1935 Derby (which offered a purse of \$17,575), went on to Louisville, and two weeks later was runner-up to Omaha in the 1935 Kentucky Derby. Whiskolo, who was second in the Texas Derby, finished right behind Roman Soldier in the Run for the Roses.

Pari-mutuel racing in Texas provided employment for thousands of people through hundreds of allied businesses. The Depression days were fading, and the Texas agricultural economy was soaring due to countless new horse ranches. Everything looked rosy until a masterful politician, Gov. James V. Allred, convinced the 1937 Texas legislature to approve a bill eliminating wagering on horseraces in the state.

Historians point out that the Protestant churches, led by the

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Baptists, had been hard at work plotting the demise of legal betting ever since Ma Ferguson and her cronies upset the apple cart four years earlier, hoodwinking the legislators who opposed pari-mutuel. Thus, in 1937, Texas became the only one of 38 states that voted pari-mutuel out after approving such legislation.

For the next half-century, the torrid political battle between the proponents and opponents of Texas horseracing was viewed with amusement by the national industry. "Poor Long-Starved State," outsiders were said to have joked. "They've got more than two million horses there, but no racing."

But after decades of struggle at the statehouse, the issue finally was handed to the public to decide in 1987. In November of that year, Texas voters passed a referendum allowing for pari-mutuel wagering. Several mid-size horsetracks soon opened throughout the state, with those closest to large cities generally experiencing the greatest success.

With the state's share of the pari-mutuel handle fixed at 5 percent, however, there was initially no profit incentive to attract big-time investors or license applicants for the large-scale Class 1 tracks, slated for Texas's three most populated urban centers - Dallas-Fort Worth, San Antonio and Houston.

Newly elected Gov. Ann Richards and a continually depressed state economy finally helped convince Texas lawmakers that the biggest revenue-producing tracks would remain a dream unless steps were taken to make construction possible. So, during a special legislative session in 1991, the racing bill was drastically altered, with the state's share of the handle reduced to 1 percent.

The new measure called for an increase to 2 percent for the state after the first \$100 million wagered, rising by 1 percent with each additional \$100 million until a 5 percent ceiling was reached. Racetrack developers responded swiftly, and as the \$85 million Sam Houston Race Park opens its doors, two more major-sized Texas tracks are under construction, both scheduled to open next spring: the \$79 million Retama Park near San Antonio and the \$108 million Lone Star Jockey Club between Dallas and Fort Worth.

Trinity Meadows, Bandera Downs and Manor Downs all continue to operate most of the year, with yet another mid-size track - Lubbock Downs in northwest Texas - in the works.

Ma Ferguson, Col. Waggoner and the other ghosts of Texas racing's past would be proud.



"Miriam A. 'Ma' Ferguson was the governor of Texas when pari-mutuel wagering was legalized in a last minute, surprise amendment tacked on to the semi-annual appropriations bill passed by the Senate and the House. Vetoing the amendment meant vetoing the entire bill and cutting off funding for the state for two years."



SAM HOUSTON
RACE PARK

Friday, April 29, 1994 DAILY RACING FORM

Connally's dream has come to pass

Despite early setbacks, opening is on time, (almost) on budget

By **ANNE LANG**

Special to Daily Racing Form

Less than a year ago, it looked like Sam Houston Race Park would be the last of Texas' Class 1 tracks to get under way - if it ever got under way at all. There were plenty of reasons to doubt its emergence.

Since receiving their license from the Texas Racing Commission in August 1991, representatives of the proposed \$80 million facility had explored numerous avenues of financing, coming up empty each time. They spent the last half of 1992 and the first half of 1993 trying to launch a plan to sell municipal bonds, which called for operating the track in cooperation with Harris County. But the plan collapsed when the legality of a county-operated Class 1 track came into question.

The future looked bleak until May 11, 1993, when a group headed by former Texas Gov. John Connally

stepped forward with a \$5 million cash advance and a pledge to raise the remaining \$75 million through the sale of high-yield private bonds. Former thoroughbred owner Connally was a director and consultant for the Houston-based Maxxam Corporation, a multi-billion-dollar Fortune 500 company involved in aluminum, lumber and real estate.

Maxxam chairman Charles Hurwitz and Connally were leaders of the new group, which purchased the now-defunct Houston Sports Association's 18 percent share of the track. The rest of the original investor structure remained unchanged.

Tragically, the 76-year-old Connally died only one month following the announcement, succumbing to complications from pulmonary fibrosis. His death shook the racing industry, but the leaders of Sam Houston Race Park vowed to keep moving forward

to bring their racetrack to fruition, as they knew Connally would have wished. By the time the bond sales were completed in July, construction already had begun on the 230-acre property in northwest Houston. Guests at last August's "turf-breaking" ceremony were startled to see bulldozers and other heavy machinery engaged in the advance stages of site preparation.

Connally no doubt would be proud to see the track in all its brand-new splendor today. Given his confidence in Maxxam, he probably wouldn't be surprised that the project was completed on time - a rare event where most major construction schedules are concerned. And the final price tag? It only went up another \$5 million from the originally proposed \$80 million.

What Connally would see if he were around to view the track today is a plant where function was chosen



COADY PHOTO

BREAKING GROUND: Construction was well under way by the time bond sales had been completed last July.

over form. The three-level grandstand is devoid of the architectural adornments featured at other major-league tracks - such as California's Santa Anita Park - but it was designed with the patron's comfort and enjoyment in mind.

Fans can choose from several seating options. A general admission ticket grants access to the grandstand lower level (including bench seats on the apron that stretches down to the track rail), the paddock area or the standee ramp. General-admission patrons also can take the tunnel to the infield, where they'll find volleyball nets, swing sets and more than 300 picnic tables, as well as concession stands, bathrooms and mutuel windows.

Or they might prefer to spend the day in the 40,000-square-foot Pavilion

area, just north of the grandstand, which features a sports bar, food court and mutuels. A party room in the Pavilion can be reserved for various groups, and businesses can reserve the corporate tents located just north of the Pavilion. All of the tents and the Pavilion are air-conditioned.

On Level 1 of the grandstand is a large wall with dozens of TV monitors, where fans can access past and current races. At the front of the grandstand are 80 indoor mutuel windows, which back up to 80 more outdoor-facing mutuel windows.

Level 2 of the grandstand includes reserved seating, The Jockey Club, box seats and a large restaurant. Reserved seating for opening weekend was sold out weeks earlier, but, normally, patrons can call ahead for theater-type seats or seats at counters for ease in handling handicapping materials, food and beverages. Those who wish to reserve an all-day

table in the track's restaurant, The Winner's Circle, are advised to call two weeks in advance.

All regular box seats also were sold out prior to the opening, as were most of the 300 available memberships in The Jockey Club. The latter costs \$6,000 to join and \$90 per month, which entitles the member to bring up to three guests and to be seated either in The Jockey Club box seats, party room or loft or at numerous dining tables.

After opening weekend, large groups can rent one of two luxury suites on the grandstand's Level 3: the Assault Suite (named after one of Texas racing history's most famous thoroughbreds, winner of the 1946 Kentucky Derby), which holds up to 20 people, or the Celebration Suite, which can accommodate up to 60.

Also on the third level are SHRP's 19 private luxury suites, which sold out months ago - even before the brochures could be printed - at an

annual cost of \$45,000-\$65,000 each (depending on proximity to the finish line). Three-year leases were signed by the suite owners, who include such well-known Houston racing names as Tom Tatham, Mike Rutherford, Joe McDermott and Bill Heiligbrodt. The centrally located Sam Houston Suite is shared by the SHRP executives, their guests and families. The Founders Club, located on the paddock side of the grandstand, is a private room for SHRP's 66 limited partners.

Outside the luxury suites is a gallery that features the equine works of various artists, while down the hall is the press box, stewards' room and camera room. And back on the first level, patrons can visit the track gift shop: The Colors at Sam Houston. A gift shop catalog is available and includes a toll-free number for ordering merchandise by phone.



GRANDSTAND: Three-level facility features reserved seating, a dining room, Jockey Club boxes, private luxury suites, an art gallery and a gift shop.

COMBY PHOTO

This could have been

DAILY RACING FORM Saturday, April 30, 1994

accomplished 'only in Texas'

HOUSTON - Forty-eight hours before the very first horses would be called to the post at Sam Houston Race Park, all was amazingly calm at the \$85 million track.

Inside the grandstand, mutuel clerks quietly practiced at their stations. Concession workers unloaded boxes and joked among themselves. Maintenance workers put the finishing touches on various landscaped areas and swept debris from the paddock area. Except for a few scattered "wet paint" signs and a temporary sales counter advertising opening weekend tickets, this could be any established racetrack, anywhere, on a dark day.

"Actually, this week has been a piece of cake," said vice president of operations Ken Pearson. "The week before the horses arrived (on April 1) was our nerve-wracking time. You want everything to be perfect, but especially for the horses."

Pearson's main area of concentration is the backside, and the remarks he's gotten from trainers and riders alike during the past few weeks have been favorable, he said.

Jockey Bobby Lester, who transferred his tack here following his third-place overall ranking at the recently concluded Oaklawn Park

meet, described the track surface as "excellent, at least this week. We'll know more when the races start."

Trainer Tom Amoss, who has 32 stalls here, agreed. "I'm real pleased with the track. The past two weeks, it's been nothing short of excellent. I'm hearing good comments from exercise riders and jockeys." Amoss also gives the stable area high marks.

"The barns are very well-ventilated," he said. "The horses seem to like it here, and their health is good. I'm very satisfied."

Thursday was billed as media day, an opportunity for the press to preview the facility and ask questions of key personnel, including general manager Jim Murphy, publicity director Rick Mocklin and Pearson. About 50 individuals (most of them representing non-racing publications and networks) showed up with notepads and cameras, and later tagged dutifully along on a walking tour, asking polite questions of publicity assistant Byron Adams.

Rightfully boasting about his large-scale facility that was built in less than a year's time, Murphy said: "Only in Texas do we have the talent, commitment, resources and dedication to accomplish so much in

such a short time." Of the state's future large-scale racing picture, he declared: "The ingredients are here for Texas to be comparable with (the caliber of racing in) New York and California." While track executives hope to handle an average of \$1.5 million a day, Murphy admits they don't expect such numbers right away. "We realize we may get off to a slow start as the educational process takes hold."

Mocklin identified fan education as one of the track's primary goals. "We know people will be drawn here by two basic factors: curiosity and a love of Thoroughbred racing. The trick is to make them come back again and again."

- Anne Lang

Texans can't wait to get a look inside

By ANNE LANG

Special to Daily Racing Form

HOUSTON - Twenty-four hours before Friday's grand opening of Sam Houston Race Park, the flags bordering the track's main entrance were no longer flying at half-mast in honor of former President Nixon's funeral, held the previous day. Thus the only trace of anything the least bit mournful was gone from the scene.

Thirty minutes before the gates opened for Thursday's Preview Day, cars were lined up a quarter-mile on the Sam Houston Tollway. Ninety minutes later, the crowds were lined up 12-deep at the track's mutuel windows, opened for the first time at 3:30 p.m.

The winner of a drawing for the track's first mutuel ticket was 84-year-old Mary Bishop of Houston, who with her daughter made a last-minute decision to check out the plant.

Looking delighted, somewhat bewildered and very small as the hordes of television cameras and

reporters closed in, Bishop put \$2 on Texas-bred Money Basque in the first race on opening day, the \$25,000-added Mesquite Handicap. She chose number six, she said, "because it was easy." Thursday marked Bishop's first trip to a racetrack, and her name was drawn from a box of more than 4,000 others. Track officials were hoping crowds would exceed the 20,000 who showed up for the first Preview Day last Saturday.

On the first level of the grandstand, SHRP publicity assistant Byron King's handicapping seminar was standing room only. Outside in the winner's circle, a newcomer's seminar conducted by the Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association's Brock Sheridan drew a sizeable crowd. (Sample question: "Which direction do the horses run in?" Another: "Is that (jockey's scale) for weighing the horses?")

Beer and margarita sales were brisk, elevators and escalators were full to capacity, and baby strollers and wheel chairs alike rolled through the cavernous facility.

Darryl Mackey, an employee for a Houston security systems firm, was accompanied by his two daughters, ages six and three. "It's good that they're catering to families here, and not just to the gamblers," he said. "When we go to the dog track, we have to get a babysitter."

A steady parade of horses being acclimated to the crowds walked between the track and the paddock area, ogled appreciatively by dozens of fans. Two of those watching were Verg and Billye Offult of Houston, both in their late 70's, and both of whom remember attending the races at Houston's first pari-mutuel track - way back in the 1930's.

"You wouldn't believe the crowds they had at Epsom Downs," Verg recalled. "There was just a two-lane road leading to the track, and it was constantly jam-packed with cars. You could hardly move in the grandstand. It was wonderful."

The Offults said they feel confident SHRP will fare comparably, pointing out that "this is still Texas, and Texans still love horses."

The slow path

By ANNE LANG

Special to Daily Racing Form

Modern-day, grand-scale Texas horseracing has taken its time getting to the starting gate, and the road to that gate has not been smooth.

In 1987, Texans voted to bring back pari-mutuel wagering after a 50-year absence, and the handful of Class 2 (midsize) tracks that subsequently emerged have experienced varying degrees of success or failure — influenced primarily by their respective proximities to major population centers.

Of the Class 2 tracks that have opened since 1989, the highest handle and attendance figures have been recorded at Trinity Meadows, near Fort Worth, and Bandera Downs, near San Antonio. Each track offers both thoroughbred and quarter horse racing. Manor Downs, located just outside Austin, offers only quarter horse racing and has not fared as well as the other two tracks.

G. Rollie White Downs in Brady, located in a rural area about 80 miles south of Abilene, opened in 1989 with a mixed-meet format but was forced to close just three months later.

Until the state's 5 percent share of track handle was reduced to 1 percent in 1991 (on a sliding-scale format), no Class 1 developers had stepped forward with license applications because the financial risk was too great. That's why Texas' first major-sized track just now is getting under way.

In addition to the state's three existing Class 2 tracks, Gillespie County Fairgrounds in Fredericksburg (about 80 miles northwest of San Antonio and 80 miles west of Austin) conducts a Class 3 fair-type meet for a total of 14 days during the summer, on selected weekends. The owners of Lubbock Downs, a proposed \$9 million Class 2 track in northwest Texas, have received approval of their tentative financing and hope to offer pari-mutuel racing by June 1995.

But it's the Class 1 tracks — ranging in price from \$79 million to \$108 million — that most racing fans believe will lift Texas racing to the caliber of major racing states.

According to the Texas Racing Act, Class 1 licenses only can be issued to tracks located in counties with populations of at least 750,000,

of pari-mutuel progress

or adjacent counties. That criterion limited the Class 1 races to Houston, San Antonio, and the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Houston's Class 1 facility obviously is the \$85 million Sam Houston Race Park, which edged out one other contender for the local license in 1991. Financing — specifically, bond sales coordinated by Sam Houston general partner Maxxam Corporation — was obtained last summer, just after Maxxam came on board.

In the San Antonio area, developers of the \$79 million Retama Park were unchallenged for the license they received three years ago, but the group completed its financing only last December. Ground-breaking commenced immediately, and

Retama partners are projecting an opening in April 1995.

Located on a 200-acre site (with an additional 500 acres available for related development) just northwest of the city, Retama is expected to request 17 annual weeks of thoroughbred racing, followed by 10 weeks of quarter horse racing, with night racing on weekdays and matinees on weekends. Mainly as a means of enhancing live racing purses, track executives are seeking approval from the racing commission and state horsemen to conduct pre-opening simulcasting off site, preferably to commence this summer.

The Dallas/Fort Worth area will have the singular distinction of boasting two Class 1 tracks,



TRINITY MEADOWS: Has been granted Class 1 status on the condition that its racing surface is enlarged.

although only one of them will be a large-scale facility. The smaller of the two, Trinity Meadows, previously was a Class 2 track (located about 20 miles west of Fort Worth) that opened in 1991. Trinity's owners recently were granted an upgrade to Class 1 status - which they can retain under the requirement that they expand their five-eighths of a mile dirt course to a mile within the next two years.

The upgrade was part of an out-of-court settlement between racing commissioners and Trinity's owners and includes track executives' agreement not to participate in a racing circuit coordinated by the state's other three Class 1 tracks. Trinity presently is conducting a mixed thoroughbred-quarter horse meet, which began in March and will run through June 20. The track will offer an all-thoroughbred meet this summer (while Sam Houston is conducting its all quarter horse meet), followed by another mixed meet in the fall.

The \$108 million Lone Star Jockey Club is being built in the city of Grand Prairie, located midway between Dallas and Fort Worth. Lone Star developers won their Class 1 license in 1992 and spent the next 15 months battling legal challenges posed by the three losing applicants. Although the disputes all have resulted in either settlements or mergers (the latter being with R.D. Hubbard's Midpointe Racing), Lone Star's owners still aren't out of the woods, as they currently are trying to wrap up bond sales intended to finance the bulk of their track.

But interim financing has enabled developers to proceed with site preparation and preliminary construction, and officials still are targeting an opening in May 1995. As with Retama, Lone Star principals hope to get the commission's go-ahead to conduct pre-opening simulcasting beginning this summer, in a temporary structure to be erected on a parking lot at the 285-acre site.

When completed, Grand Prairie's Lone Star Jockey Club (the track's full official name) will be twice the size of Sam Houston.

Bandera Downs, located about 40 miles northwest of San Antonio, began its live mixed meet (thoroughbreds, quarter horses and Arabians) in February and will run through Sept. 5. The track will continue its mixed live format after the opening of nearby Retama Park, supplementing its cards - as will all Texas tracks - with interstate and intrastate simulcasting.



SAM HOUSTON
RACE PARK

Design with horse in mind

By **ANNE LANG**

Special to Daily Racing Form

HOUSTON - You can talk all you want to about the importance of keeping racing patrons comfortable, safe and happy, but if you don't do the same for horses, you won't have much of a show.

Such was the mind-set of Sam Houston vice president of operations Ken Pearson during the last few years when, armed with a camera, notepad and tape measure, he traipsed around the barns of major Southwestern racetracks, collecting ideas for creating the best possible backstretch at the new track.

Pearson interviewed trainers, veterinarians, grooms and hotwalkers, regarding details that would be met in an ideal backstretch setting. He returned to Texas to pull it all together with Sam Houston's team of architects and design consultants.

The result is a state-of-the-art facility featuring the maximum variety of elements to ensure that runners lack for nothing.

"The whole facility ... is a composite of about 10 other racetracks' best features, which we adapted to fit our site," he said.

But that assessment came under fire by Texas horsemen when they

discovered there would be just 1,200 stalls - considered few by Class 1 standards. Racing secretary Randy Soth, who had to deny the bulk of 4,500 applications for those, became a scapegoat. But the grumbling died down when it was announced that 90 percent of those accepted were Texas-affiliated.

The track has 17 barns, each of which contains 64 stalls. Barn Q, the "mega-barn" as Pearson calls it, has 120 stalls, and the stakes barn has 16. There is a requisite receiving barn, test barn and post-mortem barn, and a sophisticated equine hospital.

The focus is on ventilation, to combat the high humidity and heat. The seven-foot, eight-inch stall walls are open at the top, with sloping ceilings overhead that start at 12 feet and peak at 18 feet. The roof on each barn is supported by outside columns, and beneath the overhang that encompasses each barn is a 12-foot-wide alley for hot-walking. Every stall has double-duplex plugs to accommodate fans. A scattering of skylights alleviates gloom.

Any fire occurring in the barn area can be contained and extinguished rapidly. A fire sensor pinpoints the exact location of smoke or flames. The primary material used for the buildings was pre-engineered

steel, while the stalls were constructed of galvanized steel tubing frames with two-by-six-inch tongue-in-groove pine walls. Those walls were coated with a fire-retardant substance, Pearson said.

A windscreen has been erected to help shut out late-afternoon sun and winter winds. Insects will be kept to a minimum through use of gnats, which have voracious appetites for fly larvae but are guaranteed to bother neither horses nor humans.

Trainers aren't apt to have to wait for automatic hotwalkers, as there are 80 machines on the backstretch - and ample numbers of wash racks. There are small grass patches for hand-grazing, although most of the barn area is covered with sand.

The backstretch's human population has not been overlooked. Every 64-stall barn includes eight dorm rooms, each housing two backstretch workers. There is one bathroom for every four rooms. A recreation room, located next to the track cafe, features video games, pool tables and televisions.

The track kitchen - called the Homestretch Cafe - was placed between the stable and the administration building. The cafe can hold up to 250 people, and serves as a place for Sunday worship services.

Richards gets taste of traffic

HOUSTON - Good sport though she is, Texas Gov. Ann Richards got an unplanned taste of what it's like to be caught in a good old-fashioned Houston traffic jam - en route to Friday's opening day ceremonies at Sam Houston Race Park.

As approximately 15,000 fans, dozens of racing dignitaries and an increasingly nervous group of SHRP track executives counted down the final 30 minutes to the inaugural post, Gov. Richards and her entourage were waiting it out with the masses in the congested parking lot just outside the grandstand.

To fill the time, a brass band and a barbershop quartet took turns going through their respective repertoires, and the ever-jovial master of ceremonies, Chris Lincoln, kept up a lively banter.

Minutes before the first race, the governor - her trademark sunny smile and famous hair still in place - was hustled to the winner's circle in time for a ribbon-cutting and brief speech, during which she commended Maxxam CEO Charles Hurwitz for bringing the track on line and said a very public hello to the late Gov. John Connally's widow, Nellie, who was present. Prior to his death last June, Connally had been a Maxxam consultant and was instrumental in obtaining the corporation's new role as general partner.

But the hassle Richards had been through in getting to the facility was evident immediately following the



RICHARDS: Caught in traffic.

ceremony, as she uncharacteristically cut short her accessibility to the media and skipped her usual spontaneous hand-shaking with the crowd.

She did pause long enough to offer a few comments on the potential for casino gambling in Texas - an issue expected to be introduced in the 1995 legislature - saying: "We ought to give the racetracks a chance to succeed before we encroach on their profits."

Regarding riverboats in particular, she said: "This business of slapping boats together and putting a brass rail around them is ridiculous. If we're going to go for the casinos, we might as well do it whole hog (with resort-type enterprises)."

Richards added that the only way she would support any type of casino gambling in the near future would be if the federal courts override her refusal to negotiate a compact with the Tigua Indians, who want to build a \$70 million casino in West Texas.

-Anne Lang



SAM HOUSTON
RACE PARK

Horseracing isn't only game in town

Tracks must decide to fight or join casinos

By ANNE LANG
Special to Daily Racing Form

HOUSTON — Texas may well be regarded as the final frontier for major-league horseracing, but that distinction doesn't render it immune to the proliferation of other wagering options currently plaguing most racing states. And while many of those states have developed an "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" attitude, the Texas racing industry still contains a sizable contingent of purists determined to fight outside gambling forces to the bitter end.

The first round of that fight was lost in 1991, when Texas voters and lawmakers approved a constitutional amendment that would allow the state to operate a lottery. Ticket sales began on May 29, 1992, and the Texas Lottery immediately smashed all national records — recording first-week sales of \$102.4 million. During the lottery's initial full fiscal year of Sept. 1, 1992-Aug. 31, 1993, total ticket sales exceeded \$1.9 billion, with \$656,844,512 of that amount going into state coffers.

Compare those numbers with

horse and dog racing revenues collected during calendar year 1993, and it seems evident that the average Texas gambler would rather drive to the corner convenience store than to the racetrack. Last year, Texas' four pari-mutuel horse tracks handled a collective total of \$165,666,206, allocating \$1.6 million to the state. Total handle at the state's three greyhound tracks was \$344,279,642, from which the state received \$9.2 million.

As the state's first large Class 1 track, Sam Houston Race Park is expected to provide a significant boost to those numbers. Track executives say they hope to handle as much as \$300 million during 1994, which includes two thoroughbred meets and a quarter horse meet. When similar-sized Retama Park near San Antonio and Lone Star Jockey Club in north Texas come on line in the spring of 1995, horseracing revenue will get two more major shots in the arm.

Meanwhile, riverboat gambling looms as a formidable challenge. More than a dozen successful casino companies from out of state (Mirage Resorts Inc., Station Casinos Inc., Hollywood Casino Corporation, Jackpot Enterprises Inc., etc.), as well as some newly formed Texas enterprises, are beginning to circle like sharks — most having already put scores of savvy lobbyists to work in preparation for the next Texas



MURPHY: Sees success of dog tracks as a positive omen.

Legislature, which convenes in January 1995. One element casino proponents feel they have in their favor is a recent Texas poll, showing 48 percent of citizens surveyed in support of legalized casino gambling.

But proponents' forward momentum will be slowed considerably if Texas attorney general Dan Morales comes through with his expected opinion: that riverboat and dockside casinos cannot be approved by legislators without a constitutional amendment. As with the lottery, such an amendment requires a two-

thirds majority vote in both the House and the Senate, and a majority vote of Texans. And though Morales' opinion is not binding, experts on both sides predict it will have a substantial influence on lawmakers.

The "can't beat 'em, so join 'em" philosophy has apparently been adopted by SHRP's general partner, Maxxam Corporation, which recently teamed with Mirage Resorts for a planned \$300 million casino and amphitheatre in downtown Houston. The casino portion of the plan, of course, hinges on what happens at the Capitol. But if a casino bill does pass in either the 1995 or 1997 legislative sessions, SHRP probably won't be the only Texas track exploring ways to get a piece of casino action, as a means of ensuring survival.

Perceived to be less of a threat to live racing, due to the remoteness of its potential location, is Indian gaming. Lawyers for the Tigua tribe near El Paso and lawyers for the state are currently negotiating a settlement that the Tiguas hope will allow them to construct a \$70 million casino in West Texas. A U.S. district judge is mediating the debate, since the issue was initially challenged in a federal court. One area of contention is that the Tiguas want to offer blackjack and roulette, while the state wants to limit the options to pari-mutuel wagering and pull-tab games.

Gov. Ann Richards last year

refused to sign the tribe's casino compact, stating that she wants no new gambling ventures diverting profits from the state's fledgling pari-mutuel racing industry and the lottery. There have been preliminary steps taken toward casino proposals by a few other Texas tribes, also, but the Tigua case remains at the core of Texas Indian gaming controversy.

And as for greyhound racing posing any kind of threat to horseracing, that possibility was minimized by the original racing act approved in 1987, which limits dog tracks to three counties on the Texas coast — far from all of the state's horse racetracks except SHRP. Gulf Greyhound Park, located about one hour from Houston in the town of LaMarque, has enjoyed consistently high attendance and handle during its first 15 months of operation, but SHRP general manager Jim Murphy views that success as a positive omen for his own track.

"First of all, we're a lot closer to the city, so we're likely to draw more people," he said. "And we have to realize, the dog tracks have helped horseracing in educating the public on pari-mutuel betting. Lastly, Texas is horse country, and Sam Houston offers a park-like setting with emphasis on the horse — whereas a dog track is much more of a straight wagering environment."