



A Split Vote On Mixed Meetings

By Anne Lang

That a distressed national economy has triggered an ever-increasing fight for survival among American racetracks is a notion with which few industry participants would disagree. As more and more wagering options crop up in financially strapped states where horse racing previously ruled unchallenged, track managers find themselves in an ongoing struggle to pinpoint the elusive combination of elements needed to secure a long and prosperous future for their respective facilities.

When the country's present shortage of race-ready Thoroughbreds is added to the crisis, the task of producing daily cards with full fields often becomes a racing secretary's nightmare.

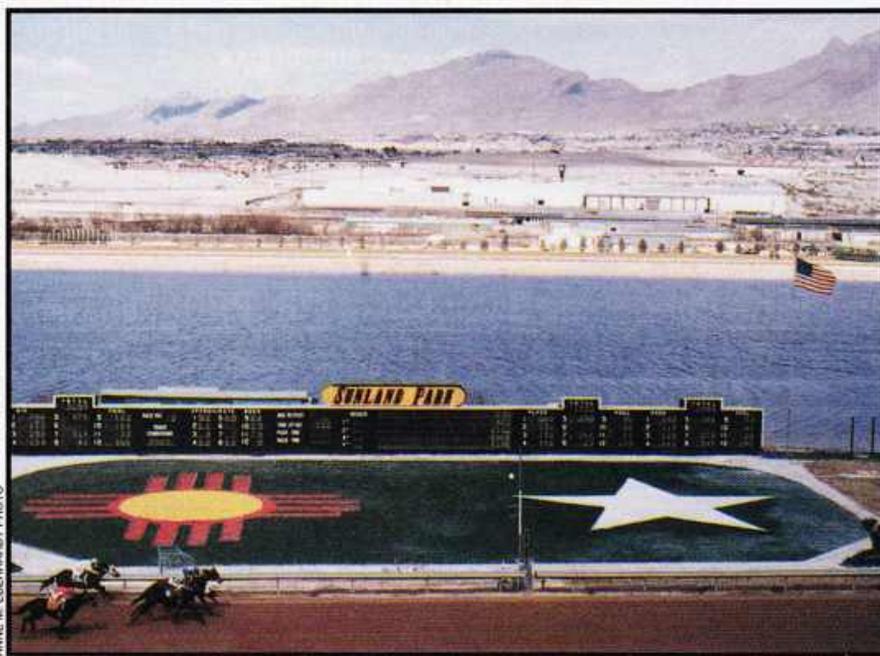
The mixed-meeting format—where each day's card includes a mixture of Thoroughbred races and Quarter Horse events—has arguably saved more than one U.S. track from extinction. In the Southwest, where the core of American Quarter Horses compete for that breed's most lucrative purses (bolstered by the support of longstanding fans), numerous tracks confront the horse shortage dilemma by hosting mixed meetings.

But while mixed programs have virtually eliminated the problem of scanty fields at several tracks located in or near the heart of prime Quarter Horse territory—specifically Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana, and Texas—there exists in some of those states a large and influential number of Thoroughbred purists who remain staunchly loyal to the tradition of split (or "straight") meetings, which require a track to devote an entire multi-month season to one breed.

It is difficult to fairly deduce which format, if either, is truly superior—since an infinite number of variables from each

track makes it nearly impossible to present equal comparisons. Such variables include placement of a given breed's race on the card, the Thoroughbred-to-Quarter Horse race ratio, the number of races per day, exotic-wagering patterns,

markets. The only Class II (medium-sized) tracks offering Thoroughbred racing in Texas are Bandera Downs near San Antonio, which will continue its mixed-meeting format in 1993; and Trinity Meadows near Fort Worth, which



Sunland Park in New Mexico races Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses on the same cards

days on which racing is conducted, and countless others. What is easily reported, however, is the subjective variety of strategies and perspectives on the "mixed vs. split" issue from industry experts in the Southwest.

The debate lately has been a hot topic in Texas, where a newly revived parimutuel industry is haltingly groping its way along. The state's large-scale Class I tracks are still in preliminary stages of development; consequently, a scattering of mid-size Texas tracks remain under intense scrutiny as the first local test

conducted mixed meetings from its May, 1991, opening through the end of 1992.

But Trinity executives—citing the need to boost handle for track improvements and stating they felt fans preferred to wager on Thoroughbreds—last November made an unexpected request to conduct split meetings in 1993, subsequently receiving the racing commission's approval of a March 6-Aug. 8 Thoroughbred season, followed by an Aug. 19-Dec. 31 Quarter Horse meeting.

Officials from the Texas Thoroughbred
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Breeders' Association backed the decision: their position being that under the mixed format, Thoroughbred owners were not getting sufficient opportunities to race their horses, and the public was not getting enough exposure to the breed.

Quarter Horse owners at Trinity Meadows were outraged at the last-minute change. Many already were irreversibly committed to spend the year at the Willow Park track. Spokesmen from the Texas Quarter Horse Association, while making it clear that the TQHA was generally amenable to the concept of split meetings, sided with the track's Quarter Horse owners and trainers in protesting the late notice.

Rush McGinty, executive director of the Texas chapter of the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, said his organization did not take an official position on the Trinity Meadows issue, since it represents horsemen from both sides. But he emphasized that given the fledgling state of the Texas industry, much of what is decided now is based on pure speculation.

"It doesn't really matter what the HBPA or anybody else says," McGinty pointed out. "The betting public is going to decide which format is best. We need to afford every breed the opportunity to race, and see how much the public will accept."

Many criticized the apparent lack of research that went into the Trinity Meadows decision. One of those was Dan Fick, senior director of racing at the American Quarter Horse Association. While his jurisdiction is of a national scope, Fick gets a first-hand perspective of Texas racing activities from the Amarillo-based AQHA headquarters.

"There was absolutely no information presented on the public interest, the availability of quality horses, and the economic impact," he said. "It's going to be a tough sell for Quarter Horses in the fall, going up against football and following six straight months of Thoroughbreds. (And) unless the handle and attendance improve dramatically, the purses aren't going to be good enough to draw any quality Thoroughbreds." Trinity Meadows' average daily handle during its recently concluded mixed meeting was \$581,578.

"They're going to have to do \$1.2 million or \$1.3 million a day to draw the horses from Remington, Louisiana Downs, and Fair Grounds," Fick predicted.

Versatile fans and bettors

Texans can look westward to New Mexico as an example of a state where mixed meetings have always prevailed. Anchoring a six-oval circuit are sister tracks Sunland Park and Ruidoso

Downs—the latter home to the \$2.3-million All-American Futurity, Quarter Horse racing's richest stakes. Sunland Park operates from January to May; Ruidoso from May to September.

Sunland general manager Harold Payne feels that although numerous studies indicate that "straight Thoroughbred meetings do handle a little better," the dominance of local Quarter Horse breeding farms, coupled with a shortage of Thoroughbreds, significantly influences the structure of New Mexico's racing industry. "Those flat numbers dictate that Quarter Horses should be included in any meeting," Payne said.

Thoroughbred owners don't complain, he continued, because the average daily race ratio is 80/20 in their breed's favor. And while the biggest pots (several of them \$250,000 and up) go to the Quarter Horses, Ruidoso/Sunland writes an ample selection of added-money events for Thoroughbreds as well. Unaccustomed to any other format, New Mexico race fans appear to be comfortable handicapping both breeds, Payne observed. "Your regular patron bets every race," he said.

New Mexico Racing Commission executive director Julian Luna agrees, adding that a large percentage of cross-breed trainers also makes for a smooth mixed program. The animosity that occasionally erupts between Quarter Horse

and Thoroughbred factions in Texas is virtually nonexistent in his state, he claims.

"We're at a point in New Mexico where we've done as much as we can do to eliminate that type of friction," Luna explained. "Our biggest concern has always been a shortage of horses for quality racing, so we're working hard together to protect what we have."

In Oklahoma, a deep-rooted devotion to the Quarter Horse is as strong as ever these days, despite the emergence of 4-year-old Remington Park as one of America's leading Thoroughbred tracks. But many Oklahoma racing industry analysts credit Remington's management for having the wisdom to perpetuate state equine traditions by conducting a straight Quarter Horse meeting between its spring and fall Thoroughbred meetings. Among Oklahoma's four tracks (two are consistently lucrative fair-ground-type operations), Blue Ribbon Downs existed as a Quarter Horse track for 18 years prior to the state's approval of pari-mutuel wagering in 1984—after which it began holding mixed meetings on a year-round basis.

The offering of split meetings at Remington and mixed meetings at Blue Ribbon results in viable choices for just about everybody.

"Remington is able to draw everything it needs to conduct straight meetings," conceded Blue Ribbon racing secretary

MORE SIMULCASTING FOR TRINITY MEADOWS

In a move intended to produce financing for grandstand and track surface improvements at Trinity Meadows Raceway, the Texas Racing Commission at a special Dec. 28 meeting granted the Class II track an additional 32 days of simulcasting. Track officials plan to use an estimated \$650,000 garnered from simulcasting the final days of Oaklawn Park's racing season (March 6-April 17) to install air-conditioning and heating in portions of the first and third levels, and to make improvements on an oval that has suffered repeated flood damage and other problems.

Commissioners approved the measure with the stipulation that if the track resurfacing and work on the grandstand's first level is not completed by the time Trinity's live meeting resumes on March 6, the panel might postpone all live racing and simulcasting until the improvements are completed. Further, if work on the grandstand's third level is not finished by April 15, the commission may fine Trinity Meadows for each additional day past that deadline.

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Tony Ritchie. "We couldn't support a straight Thoroughbred meeting, number-wise, running as long as we do. Considering our proximity to other tracks around us—such as Remington, Trinity Meadows, Oaklawn, and Woodlands—this is probably the best format for us."

Admitting that "if we could fill the cards in a straight Thoroughbred meeting, we would probably handle better," Ritchie also said Blue Ribbon's bettors are largely versatile. "They're knowledgeable enough by now that they can reasonably handicap the short sprints, and also the Thoroughbred distances. We've got a fairly good per capita average of about \$200."

Gordon Hare, executive director of the Oklahoma Racing Commission, thinks the mixed meeting format is a particularly sensible choice for Southwestern tracks because of the region's vast equine base. "If (the mixed format) is going to work at all, it's going to have the best chance of working down here," he said. "It's been proven that tracks that are in trouble financially should think about incorporating some kind of mixed format if they have sufficient numbers of horses."

But Hare doesn't refute the popular theory that Thoroughbreds are the reigning crowd-pleasers. "Even with a viable Quarter Horse base here, there's no question that Thoroughbred racing is what appeals most to the public," he said. "Blue Ribbon got the message early that if it was going to attract the people from Tulsa and Oklahoma City, who'd been patronizing Oaklawn Park, there

had to be some good Thoroughbred races on each card."

The mix in Louisiana

Despite its next-door proximity to Texas, which boasts the nation's largest Quarter Horse population, Louisiana holds fast to a long-time Thoroughbred habit. Of the state's four tracks, only two conduct mixed meetings.

Delta Downs is the state's least discriminating track, providing a straight meeting for Quarter Horses during the prime season of April through Labor Day. During Delta's September-December Thoroughbred meeting, Quarter Horses continue to run on Monday nights and Saturday matinees.

General manager Raymond Farrar explained that the Thoroughbreds are given the less desirable season because of their proven allure. "Winter is a tough time, but the Thoroughbreds can make it because people seem to prefer to bet on them—even though Quarter Horses run truer to form and should be easier to handicap," Farrar said. Accordingly, Delta's straight Quarter Horse meeting handle is supplemented by intrastate Thoroughbred simulcasts.

At another Louisiana track, "mixed" is a rather loosely used term. New Orleans' Fair Grounds runs Thoroughbreds from Thanksgiving Day through March. Inserted within that season are one Quarter Horse derby and one futurity, both around Mardi Gras time.

On Louisiana Champions Day in early December, where the focus is on state-breds, three of the day's 10 races are Quarter Horse features. The remarks of

Fair Grounds general manager Bryan Krantz reflect an attitude of resistance to change that seems to be prevalent among many Louisiana Thoroughbred horsemen. Even with video poker, the lottery, and riverboat gambling looming as increasing threats to the health of the state's racing industry—underscored by the shutdown of Jefferson Downs earlier this year—there remains a palpable reluctance to implement a mixed-meeting format to strengthen the security of all Louisiana tracks.

"If an opportunity presents itself that looks like it might be beneficial to both entities (breeds), there's always a chance that we could expand the Quarter Horse schedule we already run," Krantz allowed. "But I would guess that you'd never see a steady day-in, day-out situation of Quarter Horses racing at the Fair Grounds."

If there is an increase of mixed meetings in Louisiana, Krantz predicted, it will likely be restricted to Delta Downs. Although he alluded to the inevitability of Texas' Class I tracks drawing horses and bettors away from Louisiana, thus intensifying the problem of a "Louisiana horse population that seems to be shrinking faster than the national trend," Krantz maintains that the Fair Grounds will remain primarily a Thoroughbred venue.

"The Quarter Horse is certainly a worthy product to present to the public," he stated. "But when you compare it to what's bet on the Thoroughbreds, it just doesn't stack up."

Fick said he is mystified as to why there still seems to be a persistent aversion to mixed meetings among so many Thoroughbred supporters—not just in the Southwest, but everywhere—when the future of the racing industry is in jeopardy. "Mixed meetings make very much sense West of the Mississippi, where we've got such a large Quarter Horse population," he pointed out. "East of the Mississippi, I think there's a lack of knowledge of who Quarter Horse people are, and maybe there's a fear that we're trying to take races away from them."

"But we're really just trying to fill the races that the Thoroughbreds can't currently fill. And we certainly can't fill a full program with straight Quarter Horses at too many tracks before we run out of horses, too."

Like it or not, mixed meetings may ultimately prove to be the salvation of a troubled racing industry in which both breeds are equally vulnerable to the cold impartiality of outside gambling forces. ■

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G. ROLLIE WHITE COULD REOPEN

G. Rollie White Downs, a former Class II track that went out of business just three months into its inaugural pari-mutuel meeting in 1989, might rejoin the ranks of Texas racing establishments as early as this fall.

The city of Brady, which subsequently assumed ownership of G. Rollie White, turned the track into a training center—which has been used primarily by Southwest-based trainers working with young prospects during the off-seasons.

Brady Mayor H. L. Gober met at the track on Dec. 15 with John T. Williams, the Texas Racing Commission's director of enforcement, and director of racing Roy Wood to examine the buildings and equipment, and to discuss plans for submitting an application for a Class III meeting in 1993. Class III status limits tracks to 16 pari-mutuel racing days per year.

If the application is submitted before this spring, Williams said, it's likely that the commission's review process, license hearing, and vote could be completed in time to allow racing to begin by fall.

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