



RETAMA PARK

## TEXAS TALES

Anne Lang takes DRF readers on a journey through the history of Retama Park while John McEvoy takes a look at opening day and the upcoming meeting at Texas' newest racetrack.

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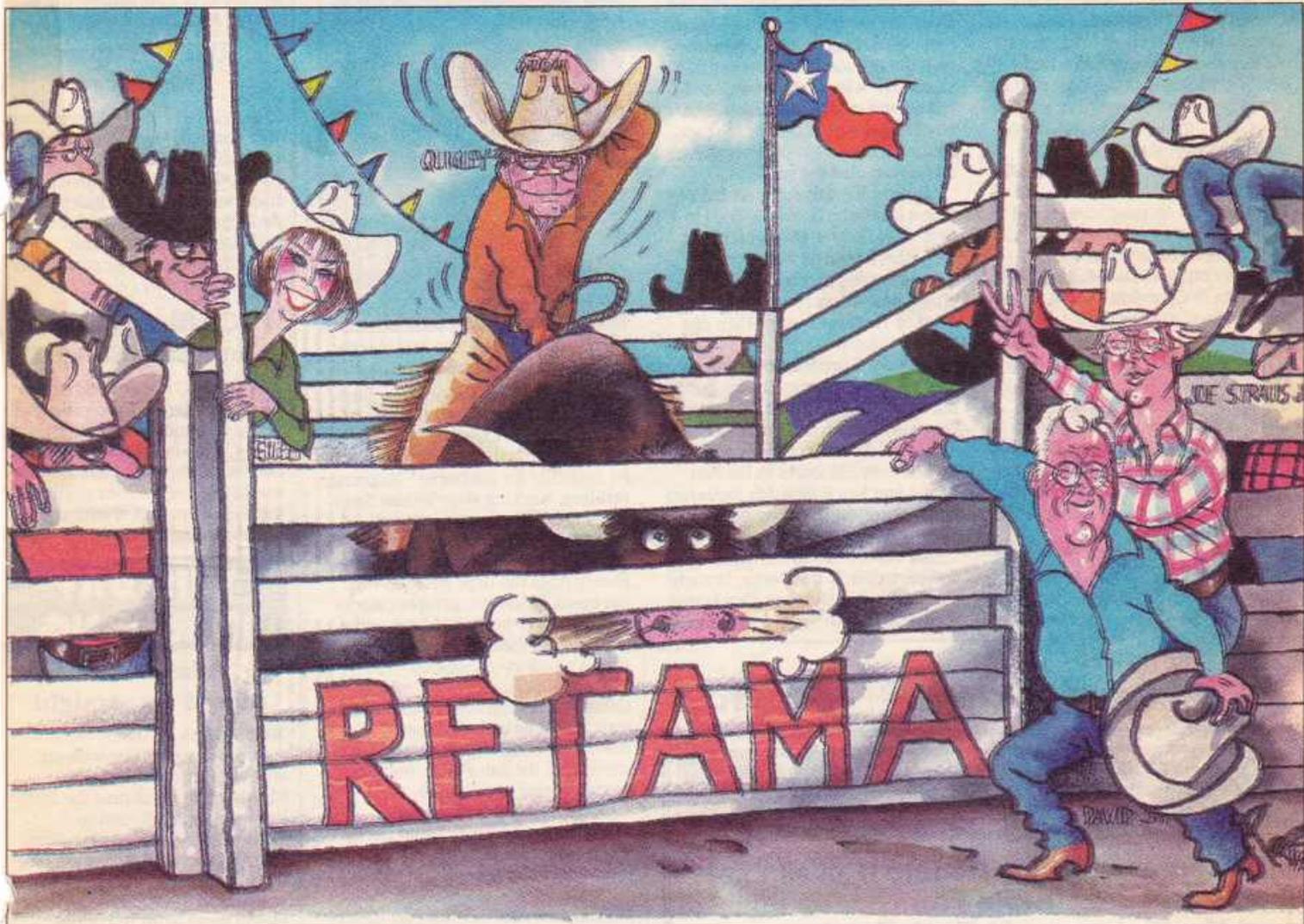
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### RETAMA



# New track bursts from the gate



## RETAMA PARK

# New \$79 million track rich in Texas tradition and history

## Legacy of Joe Straus Sr. lives on

By ANNE LANG

Special to Daily Racing Form

SAN ANTONIO, Texas - The hopeful eyes of the racing world have turned once again toward Texas, as Retama Park - the second of the Lone Star State's three designated large-scale tracks - opens for business on Friday.

It will be a familiar scenario. Just less than a year ago, Houston's \$85 million Sam Houston Race Park launched its inaugural season with all the fanfare of a royal coronation. There was much to celebrate, from both a statewide and national perspective: Texas was again hosting major-league racing after a 50-year absence; the track came on line in less than 12 months; and horsemen throughout the country were counting on this vast and potentially lucrative "final frontier" to help breathe life into an ailing industry.

But Sam Houston had a tough freshman year, falling considerably short of projected revenues and attendance. As its spring thoroughbred meet drew to a close on April 2, the track's fiscal situation remained uncertain.

That the Sam Houston road instead proved rocky hasn't deterred the resilient Texans, who are committed to producing a viable year-round circuit by century's end with a Dallas track in the works.

Sam Houston's leaders are diligently working toward putting their facility back on its feet; the Dallas/Fort Worth area's Lone Star Jockey Club has obtained some solid financial backing and may be getting closer to pouring concrete; and the \$79 million Retama Park is emerging as the state's current symbol of renewed hope.

"Everybody in the racing industry is looking down our throat right now," said Joseph Straus Jr., 68, Retama Park's chairman and chief executive officer. "So we're just determined to succeed."

The determination of Joe and his brother David, 72, transcends economic desires. The two are part of a Texas racing legacy that began long

before their father, prominent horseman Joseph Sr., died 11 years ago at the age of 84.

In 1945, the elder Straus established the 1,500-acre Straus Medina Ranch, which sits on its original site just four miles from San Antonio's busy Loop 410. Maintaining the ranch's previous function as a cattle operation, Joe Sr. at one time had more than 1,000 registered Herefords on the property. But his passion was thoroughbreds, which he kept at a second location, La Cima Ranch - a 1,000-acre site that's now a major section of downtown San Antonio.

Straus' multiple stakes winner and \$285,395 earner Reneged learned his trade on La Cima's training track, as did other runners, before Joe Sr. sold the ranch in 1968 - and moved his horses across town to Straus Medina.

A generous source of funding for the family's breeding and racing endeavors came from Strafco, a San Antonio-based wholesale distributing company founded by Joe Sr.'s great-uncle Jacob in 1870. Today, Joe Jr. and David represent the fourth generation of Strauses to hold the reins of Strafco, which began as a harness shop back when equines were still the primary mode of transportation.

The Strauses' affinity for the horse was further perpetuated by Joe Jr.'s and David's paternal grandfather, David Straus, who was director of the San Antonio Fair during the 1890s. "That was the first organized horse racing in Texas, as far as we can tell," said the younger David.

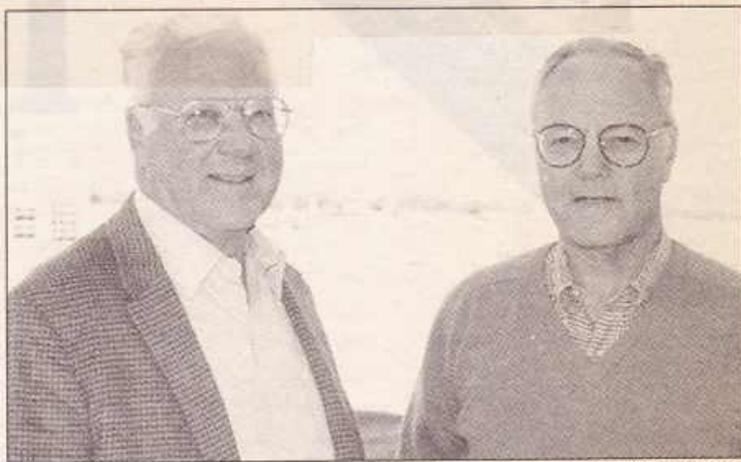
### New challenges emerge

Today, David and Joe Jr. continue to own and operate Straus Medina Ranch. About 100 head of commercial cattle share pasture land with nine Straus-owned broodmares, plus weanlings, yearlings, a couple of 2-year-olds in training and an assortment of layups.

"The Strauses' 15 or so horses of racing age are conditioned by a variety of Texas-based and out-of-state trainers, including Larry Robideaux, Harvey Vanier and Jesse Garza. Plans for ranch expansion include standing more stallions, adding a

training track and taking in outside layups. Joe and David also plan to form racing partnerships, mostly as a means of bringing newcomers into the sport.

It may be some time before the brothers' own racing successes equals those of their father, but there have been some notable triumphs during recent years. The Strauses' Happy Jazz Band (Dixieland Band out of Forli's Angel, by Broadway Forli), who they bred in Kentucky and campaigned with co-owner Bob Brennan, was a multiple Grade 1 stakes-placed winner of \$335,490. He was runner-up to Fly So Free in the 1990 Champagne Stakes, finished third in Cahill Road's Wood Memorial the following year, and

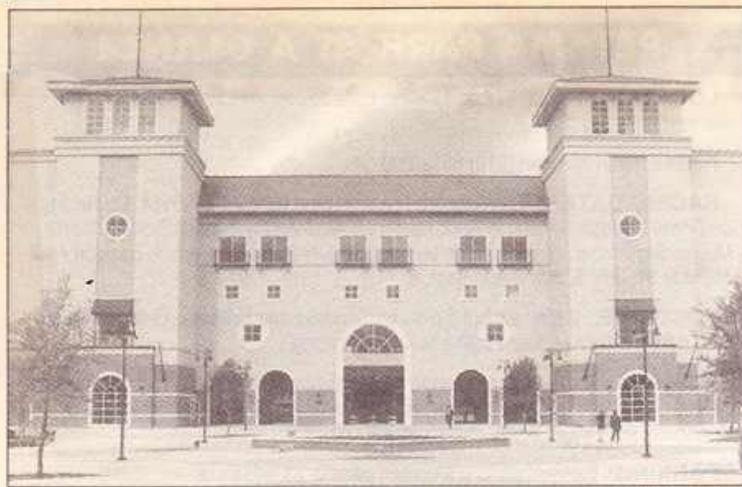


ANNE LANG PHOTO

**STRAUS BROTHERS:** David (left) and Joseph Jr. realized their father's dream of building a first-class San Antonio racetrack.

competed in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and Kentucky Derby. Happy Jazz Band now stands in Korea.

Joe and David's Forty Niner mare, Oh Niner, is still running at 5, having won nearly \$200,000 at major tracks in Florida, Kentucky and Illinois. Unraced at 2, Oh Niner's career highlights include a third-place finish in the \$50,000 Heather Handicap at Gulfstream Park. A winner of eight races in 29 starts, she has earned a paycheck in 50 percent of her outings.



RETAMA PARK PHOTO

**RETAMA PARK: Main entrance carries the Southwestern theme.**

In the wake of their father's passing, with the ranch involved in every aspect of thoroughbred activity and Strafo's continued prosperity, life might have seemed satisfying enough for the Strauses. But in 1987, Texans voted to return pari-mutuel wagering. Suddenly, the dream they shared with Joe Sr. - of building a first-class racetrack in San Antonio - looked to the brothers as though it could become a reality.

Toward that end, in 1988 they formed a racing association with former San Antonio Spurs owner Red McCombs and local businessman Marty Wender. But the following year, when those two men amicably left the project, the association was dissolved. Later the same year, the Strauses - along with Turfway Park owner Jerry Carroll - formed the Retama Park Association. They purchased an option to buy the 488-acre Retama Polo Center at the northeast end of the city, actually located in the tiny community of Selma (pop. 600). The option was contingent on a reduction in the state's then-existing five percent pari-mutuel takeout, and upon the association's being granted the area's Class 1 track license.

More investors came on board in a \$1.2 million equity sale that took place in late 1990. Seven months later, the Texas Legislature reduced the pari-mutuel tax to 1 percent on a sliding-scale basis, and also cleared the way for intertrack wagering and simulcasting. In October 1991, \$3.5 million was raised from 80 new limited partners in a private placement; Retama Park was granted a Class 1 license (with an amended application that moved the site to 226 acres adjacent to the polo center); and Retama Park Association became the planned track's general partner.

To bolster finances, track developers began negotiations with the City of Selma, which ultimately became the conduit for a municipal bond issue. In the spring of 1993, final equity solicitations took place prior to the bond sale. Finally, just four days before Christmas, financing was completed with the receipt of

\$56.2 million from the sale of tax-exempt municipal bonds (boasting an 8.75 interest rate) issued by Selma. The city council organized a subsidiary group called Retama Development Corporation, which would oversee the enterprise in cooperation with track leaders. Construction on began on Jan. 3, 1994.

When the original Retama Park partnership sold the 226-acre race-track parcel to Selma, it retained all of the surrounding land. Those 500 acres include an eight-court private tennis club, as well as Retama Park Polo Center, which still conducts matches on seven of its 16 fields. The remaining fields are leased to youth soccer leagues.

As for the remainder of the acreage, David said the "preliminary master plan" calls for a special community featuring residential and retail sections, a resort hotel, golf course and covered arena with ample seating for horse shows and rodeos. "But right now, we're just concentrating on getting the track up and running."

#### A preview of the new track

On a bright and windy afternoon just one month away from opening day, the Straus brothers led a visitor on an every-nook-and-cranny-tour of the plant, discussing every aspect as they went.

Inside the five-level grandstand, designed in a Southwestern Spanish-style architecture that reflects the region, painters converged on seemingly endless expanses of drywall; carpenters hammered and drilled away on concession counters and clubhouse boxes; electricians mounted the track's 700 television terminals and ran tests on the elaborate wiring system.

About half of the open, reserved and boxed seats at the grandstand and clubhouse levels had been bolted in place. The cavernous main kitchen was virtually completed, as were the executive offices. The basic layout is simple: the ground-floor (track) level is similar to many tracks, with multiple mutuel windows and concession areas but no

fixed indoor seating (apron benches can seat about 1,776); the second-floor grandstand level offers more of the same, only with a bit more upscale concessions and bars - plus 420 box seats, 557 reserved seats, and 1,240 unreserved seats. (All reserved seating for opening weekend, April 7-9, is sold out.)

On the third story are administrative offices, above which is the fourth-floor clubhouse level - with Champions, a buffet dining room with seating for 225; more mutuel windows, two bars and a deli-style concession; also 385 box seats, 308 reserved seats and 504 unreserved seats.

At the east end of the building, just past the wire, is Retama Park's lone pocket of elitism: the private Turf & Field Club, where jackets are required for men. The club can take in 600 members, and 300 memberships have been sold. But with table seating limited to 400, even though there's ample remaining room to mingle within the club, Joe and David say they won't promote further sales until "the newness of the track wears off, and daily attendance has leveled out a bit."

The absence of suites and skyboxes underscores the management's goal of appealing to the masses, but also reflects a practical philosophy.

"We started off planning for suites," said David, who is chairman of the Turf & Field Club board, "but (track president) Bob Quigley pointed out that they're often left empty. You can sell them for an astronomical amount up front, but in the long run, they're just not profitable - because you've got to staff them, provide extra amenities, and so forth. Boxes are different: if the box holder isn't there, he'll often give his tickets to someone else."

On the fifth floor is a fully-equipped press box that will accommodate 70 seated individuals; also a large suite designated for visiting VIPs and private rental. Adding to the track's total capacity of up to 20,000 is the Show Place Pavilion, a ground-level, 50-by-130-foot facility with plexiglass windows facing the clubhouse turn. The structure, a permanent high-tech tent, features mutuel windows, buffet dining and bars.

Retama is easily accessible, and highly visible, from Interstate 35 - Texas' most major north-south expressway.

"Everybody who travels that highway sees this place and marvels at it," Joe said.

"It sticks out like a beacon. And the mission-style architecture depicts the style of San Antonio."

Said David: "It's a good-looking facility, you can't argue with that. This track is not over-built, but it's damn sure not under-built, either."

It's not only Retama Park's instant status as a discernible South Texas landmark that track leaders feel will boost the likelihood of its success. The track, which is actually located in Selma, is a 20-minute drive from

downtown San Antonio, and 55 minutes from the state capital of Austin, a straight shot 70 miles north. Patrons will be drawn from San Antonio's metropolitan population of about 1.3 million, and an Austin-area count of about 800,000 - plus a generous scattering of hill - country communities located within an hour's radius.

"I think that's where we'll have an advantage over Houston," David said. "They're competing with the Astros, the Oilers and the Rockets, as well as teams from the University of Houston and Rice University."

"We can get the people to come out here, no problem," he said. "We just need to continue to offer them a good product."

Racing secretary Larry Craft is working hard to achieve that goal. He was faced with the pleasant dilemma of sorting through more than 3,000 applications to fill less than 1,300 stalls, and feels he's selected a competitive variety. "We're getting some good horsemen here, who are bringing some good horses," he said.

Among the first trainers at Retama will be Jack Van Berg, Donnie Von Hemel, Larry Robideaux, Mike Potenza, Bill Stice, Wade White, Amos Laborde, Steve Asmussen, Tommie Morgan, Jim Hudson, Dallas Keen, Bill Leach, Joe Weaver and Brent Davison.

#### The racing schedule

A three-day live-race week (Friday-Sunday) will be offered until May 1, when Wednesday and Thursday will be added - the logic being that several other Southwest tracks will have concluded their thoroughbred meets by then. Retama's inaugural thoroughbred season ends Sept. 17.

Track executives opted to go with a relatively conservative purse structure, initially: the average daily distribution is \$70,000, with a season stakes total of more than \$1.7 million. Projected live-racing per capita in the \$75 range is also on the moderate side, with average daily attendance expectations of 6,000.

"We're hoping that with the sale of our simulcast signal out of state, and with the simulcasting that we bring in, plus additional sponsors for added-money events, we'll be able to increase purses as time goes on," Joe said.

*"His spirit is what's helped us keep going all along. There were times when things looked pretty dismal, but we said: 'We just can't fail; we've got to complete this project for dad.'"*

**- Joe Straus Jr. talking of his father's influence on the building of Retama Park.**



RETAMA PARK PHOTO

**RETAMA PADDOCK: Part of the \$79 million facility that opens Friday.**

Added David: "We wanted to start relatively low and build up the purses, rather than start high and have to drop them midseason. The last thing we want to do is cut purses - that really sends out a negative message."

Track President Robert Quigley was a leading force in the resurrection of New Jersey's Garden State Park and the Meadowlands, and also held top positions at Atlantic City Race Course and Philadelphia Park.

Of per capita estimates, he said: "It's a guess, like anybody else's, but maybe it'll turn out to be better. I feel more optimistic all the time: last Sunday, I looked at the handle at Bandera (a middle-sized track that conducts mixed meets in a rural area about 50 miles northwest of San Antonio), and it was greater than Sam Houston's."

"Now, that shouldn't be, if you examine those two racetracks and their respective markets and populations. But it has to make you believe that there are some people down here who like to bet."

On the home front, in recognition of the general population's varied work schedule, track leaders decided on twilight racing for weekdays and Saturdays (with a 7 p.m. post time), and matinee racing (1 p.m.) on Sundays, holidays and Kentucky Derby day.

"Our decision to offer night racing was influenced by Bob (Quigley)," David said. "He instigated night racing at the Meadowlands, because they were competing with other close-by tracks, and it was very successful there. Part of our reasoning is the weather, part of it is that the general public works during the day, and we thought we'd get bigger crowds at night. Plus, on Saturdays, we won't be interfering with people's golf games and such."

If Retama fails to draw substantial crowds throughout the meet, it won't be for lack of trying. Under the direction of Joseph Straus 3rd, 35, an ambitious marketing campaign has been under way for the past year - gaining in scope and intensity as more publicity staff members came on board.

Numerous industry critics are of the opinion that Sam Houston's primary downfall was its previous management's failure to advertise more aggressively, both before their grand opening and during the crucial early weeks of their inaugural season.

Retama's decision-makers were not about to make the same mistake. At almost the exact instant the first shovelful of construction dirt was thrown, Joe and his staff mounted an energetic multimedia blitz, placing catchy ads for the track on radio and billboards, in newspapers and in magazines. Television spots began running last February.

Early on, information kiosks were set up at a heavily trafficked shopping mall, resulting in the sale of 5,470 track admission tickets and \$40,000 in merchandise. A similar booth at the San Antonio Livestock Show and Rodeo reaped sales of more than 600 tickets and \$10,000 in merchandise. Retama representatives, including track general manager Randy Soth (Sam Houston's former racing secretary), have spoken to hundreds of civic organizations. And an ever-growing list of big-name corporate sponsors has gotten involved at various levels.

#### Fan education the key

Patron education has been a big priority. Beginning in January, several handicapping seminars per week have been conducted at locations all around the city, led by a variety of Texas turf writers and other industry experts. "At every one of them, we've had to turn people away," David said.

Three small local colleges are offering fan education classes as part of their respective continuing education programs. On April 8, the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders' Association is hosting a seminar at Retama, geared toward new and prospective racehorse owners. And every day at the track, special employees called "Bettin' Buddies" will provide helpful assistance to novice racegoers.

"We're not just being aggressive now," Quigley said, "we're going to continue to be aggressive during the entire meet. We also plan to do lots

of promotions and giveaways. Sam Houston didn't do those until it was too late - they were already torpedoed by then."

Also unlike Sam Houston's original management - which limited opening-weekend attendance to half-capacity to help ensure a smooth start - Retama's leaders will welcome the throngs.

"I hope we get overrun," Quigley said with a grin. "Opening night at Garden State, we had 30,000. At the Meadowlands, we had 40,000. We weren't prepared to handle that many, it was a mess, and people kept saying: 'Isn't this terrible?' But I thought it was wonderful."

Retama hasn't overlooked San Antonio's sizable Hispanic population: printed in Spanish will be daily race-analysis sheets and some of the track's signage; important announcements will be repeated in Spanish; and numerous bilingual employees (including a percentage of mutuel clerks at every level of the building) will be available for assistance at all times.

Despite all their efforts to draw crowds to the racing site, Retama executives are unanimous in their desire to see off-track betting mandated in Texas. If the issue does come up during the current legislature (where a Senate committee recently rejected a casino gambling bill), its proponents are likely to usher it in quietly, perhaps on the coattails of another measure.

"We just have to get OTB," Joe said. "It's the latest trend. Racing goes through evolutionary changes all the time; there's no longer anything static about it. And with all the new technology, Texas has to be able to keep up. If OTB is what it takes to keep racing going, growing and prospering, then that's what we have to do."

Quigley concurred. "OTB is something that would not only enhance our own revenues, but would also boost purse pools in Texas so that we could finally become a real racing state and attract some good horses. Like any good athletes, they go where they get paid."

Another big factor that's expected to elevate Texas' status as a racing state will be the eventual creation of a year-round thoroughbred circuit, anchored by the three major tracks.

Until Lone Star Jockey Club comes on line, "we're not sure what that circuit will be," David said. "But we're hoping for an equal one-third of the year, with an annual March opening - followed by 17 weeks of racing."

In 1995, Retama's first thoroughbred meet will total 111 live days, with a 40-day quarter horse meet commencing on Sept. 28. That same day, Sam Houston - after running quarter horses all summer - will resume thoroughbred racing.

It's an understatement to say that the weeks leading up to Friday's opening were hectic.

"My emotions right now range from suicidal to homicidal," said Quigley. "There's a lot of anxiety, because we have much to do, and we want to have things in the best possible shape for opening day. It means you just keep pushing your crew, and your frustration level builds a little when you see things that have to be done twice. But really, we have a group of outstanding employees here, and they're putting in long hard hours to get it all done."

Joe agreed. "We've got something going for us that very few others in the start-up mode have had, and that's our great staff. We're lucky to have Bob, and he's pulled in some real seasoned veterans from other tracks - people who know what they're doing."

Like Quigley, Joe confessed that his sleep has been fitful of late. "It seems like we've gone from one crisis to the next," he said. "And there are still crises going on, but I think we're through the worst of it. When you tackle a tough project like this, you have to be obsessed, really. And those who are obsessed with a job will get it done some way. You can have all the intellectual and financial resources in the world, but that doesn't get things done. You have to be obsessed."

He paused to reflect, then added: "We feel good about what's coming, but you just never know. The chief anxieties are the unknowns."

David concluded: "I originally said the hard part was getting this thing planned, financed, staffed and constructed, but now I think the hard part will really begin on April 7. That's when we have to start making it work."

**RETAMA****Opening weekend gets positive reviews****By ANNE LANG***Special to Daily Racing Form*

SAN ANTONIO – Retama Park President Bob Quigley isn't one to idly bask in the glow of success.

The morning after nearly 30,000 fans – more than twice the projected number – jammed his brand-new facility to the rafters on the April 7 opening night and wagered more than \$700,000 on site, a jeans-clad Quigley was striding briskly about the plant with a worried frown on his brow.

"This can't be right," he muttered, pausing near the paddock area where employees were setting up a music platform. "Loudspeakers right next to the horses?" he asked a nearby reporter. "No, I don't think so," he replied, not waiting for an answer. "I need to find a guy with a radio. Where's a guy with a radio?" And with that, he was gone.

Quigley's business-as-usual attitude, which seems to pervade all levels of the track's personnel ranks, is apt to ensure that what relatively few bugs have emerged in Retama's

overall program soon will be worked out.

On the backside, trainers (who generally are quite happy with the facility) are hoping for more employee dormitories, grass to be planted between barns, and the addition of a few more water taps. Some would prefer to see night racing totally replaced by matinees, but that's not in the grand plan.

However, the short list of problems seems minor compared to what's going right at Retama Park. Opening night drew an eager crowd

of 29,631 to a track that supposedly could accommodate only 20,000, yet despite the admittedly crowded conditions, a festive mood prevailed.

Fans were unanimous in their praise of the attractive, user-friendly layout and the track's numerous amenities, and all who were questioned said they planned to return. That the first night's merry revelers wagered an average of only \$23 per person evidently reflected the beginner status of most bettors and many clerks. The following night and Sunday afternoon each attracted crowds of fewer than 10,000, but with per capitas of \$59 and \$66, respectively.

Off-track wagering amounted to \$1,844,507 for the first three days (added to on-site handle for a grand total of \$3,845,596, and an overall average of \$1,281,865). Three-day attendance reached nearly 48,000, for an average of 15,907, with average on-track handle of \$612,840.

"I'm sure our on-track handle will improve," said Retama Chairman Joe Straus Jr., who along with his brother David was one of the track's principal developers. "It will just happen naturally as everyone becomes familiar with the betting process. Opening night attendance was way beyond our expectations, and everybody seemed to be so euphoric. We're just thrilled with it all."

Quigley agreed. "The first-night attendance was mind-boggling," he said. "I was pleased to see so many young people out here, and families with kids in strollers. I'd obviously like our on-site handle to be more, but most bettors are new, and the whole process was slow. That will all get better with time."

An assortment of trainers who ran horses during opening week generally were optimistic about Retama's potential as a first-rate facility.

"The management team is very focused, and they seem to have the best interests of the horsemen in mind," said Wade White, who conditions Wild Hawker – winner of the \$50,000 J.R. Straus Memorial Stakes on Sunday. Regarding the track surface, White added: "From what I've seen, it might still need some work, but nothing drastic. It seemed to be very hard, and fast – looking back over the opening weekend charts, there were a lot of very fast fractions. But an amazing number of horses came from off the pace, too, so I guess it's more even than I originally thought."

Ernest Richard, who saddled Sauvage Isn't Home to win the \$25,000 Tejas Stakes on April 8, said: "The track seems a little fast, but it's early yet. Times might start getting a little slower. But, hey, I love it just the way it is. When you win two races, you don't want to change a thing."

Bobby Barnett trains for prominent owner John Franks, and said he also is pleased with the surface. "Our horses came back fine from their races," Barnett said. "They ran pretty fast there on Sunday, but you know what they say: 'horses for courses.' I sure feel that Retama is going to be a success. The facility is first-class, and there's a lot of room in the barn area. Everybody from the parking attendants on up to the general manager is extremely accommodating. They all seem to be for the horseman."

Trainer Tommie Morgan, who brought 28 horses to the San Antonio track, added: "If this track doesn't make it, Texas racing would basically become what it was several years ago, with only the smaller tracks up and running. Everybody's got to join hands and make this work, from the governor on down to the grooms."