

Houston track under microscope

Not entirely overshadowed by all the pre-Derby hoopla last week was the grand opening of Sam Houston Race Park in Texas. That the occasion marked a rare launching of such a major enterprise, rather than yet another closing, was cause for celebration in itself. That the \$85 million track came on line in just 10 months was all the more reason to cheer.

And cheers abounded for SHRP during its three-day opening weekend. Perhaps most importantly, trainers and jockeys were unanimous in their high praise of the racing surface. Fans were delighted by the relatively short mutuel and concession lines, ensured by wisely restricting initial attendance to half-capacity.

SHRP's close proximity to downtown Houston attracted many former patrons of the coastal greyhound track, located an hour's drive away. And families were drawn to SHRP's kid-friendly environment, including a deluxe

playscape and unrestricted access for all ages - a marked contrast to the dog track's 18-and-over admission policy.

But not everything is perfect. Not yet.

Most glaring was the lack of a horsemen's contract on opening weekend. Track management and the Texas HBPA finally reached a settlement last Monday, but it's a shame SHRP's signal wasn't beamed to other tracks during those first few days - if not for the caliber of races offered, at least for the historic significance.

On the backside, trainers are complaining of too-small stalls and tack rooms, cramped space in the hotwalker areas between shedrows, poor ventilation in the grooms' quarters, and gaping floor drains that could cause serious injuries at the washracks. Industrial-sized fans are needed in

ANNE
LANG



strategic locations for overheated horses just coming off the track.

Flak jackets are required for jockeys and pony riders, but not all of the latter are wearing them. The paddock viewing area could use a second tier - the rail was often six-deep with fans craning their necks to see the horses. And the 300 infield picnic tables will remain deserted with no umbrellas or trees for shade.

A sizable number of "novice" mutuel windows would benefit first-time bettors and re-route the seasoned players, who were frequently shut out as newcomers in front struggled to grasp the wagering process.

Lastly, the next time SHRP hosts an occasion large enough to warrant an auxiliary press tent, maybe they'll put it in the infield instead of near the front entrance

with no view of the track. Some canvas walls might help, too - I don't imagine too many favorable stories came from the poor wretches trying to hold on to their notes in gale-force winds.

Until similar-sized facilities open in San Antonio and North Texas next spring, SHRP leaders hold a unique and enviable distinction as owners of the state's only grand-scale racetrack. As such, they're practically guaranteed the best of horses, horsemen and purses. But the pressure is all theirs, too. How they perform under such fishbowl-like circumstances will have a profound effect on the image and success of the major-league Texas circuit to follow. And that circuit will vitally affect the national industry.

Overall, SHRP seems capable of meeting the challenge.

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