

Mississippi Horse Park Reopens Harness Track



Floyd Bell, left, and Henry McDonald train at the Mississippi Horse Park harness track.

By Steven Nalley and Bob Ratliff

Harness racing has returned to the Mississippi Horse Park near Starkville.

The facility was closed to events sanctioned by the U.S. Trotting Association in 2002 because a hill in the center of the circular track obscured the view of spectators and judges. The five-eighths-mile, all-weather track reopened on June 20, after the removal of 65,000 cubic yards of dirt.

"The hill was as tall as 25 feet in some areas and took 2 months to remove," said Bricklee Miller, facility manager with the horse park at Mississippi State University. "Now, if you are 3 feet tall or taller, you can see around the track."

Harness racing, where horses trot or pace at a steady gait carrying the riders behind them in buggies, draws crowds all over the country. Miller said 75 to 140 horses compete on a typical race day, with 10 to 15 horses on the track at a time.

The Mississippi Trotting Horse Association has about 200 members. Miller said harness racing at the historic Neshoba County Fair has familiarized many Mississippians with the sport.

"We have more than 300 stalls on our grounds, but we actually need more room," Miller said. "There are 26 local harness-racing barns, and our track supports weekly trainers from Starkville, Macon, Louisville, Pheba, West Point, Columbus, Artesia, Crawford and other areas.

"We used the dirt from the center of the track to build a future barn site and a path from the bath and shower house. We also used it to develop an area for 50 more electrical hookups for trailers and campers, for a total of 150 at the park," Miller said. "We are accomplishing several projects at one time."

Miller said the hill prevented judges from accurately recording lap times and calling fouls. After 3 years of using an elevated platform to judge races, U.S. Trotting Association officials in 2002 refused to sanction another race at the Mississippi Horse Park until the hill was moved.

"When you have a sanctioned race, the results of the race go to the national association's headquarter's database to be tallied for the horses' lifetime earnings," Miller said. "You want to be able to sanction a race because it enhances the value of the horses and

gives the drivers credit with the association."

With inflation on the rise, racers and horses need all the earnings they can get. Floyd Bell, a harness racer whose father introduced him to the sport, said it is particularly expensive to transport horses across the country to compete.

"It's rough right now," Bell said. "We have to go to Chicago and Indiana for some of the races."

Henry McDonald of Louisville, a member of the Mississippi Trotting Association and the U.S. Trotting Association, said having a track in north Mississippi helps more people enjoy the sport.

"For guys like me who don't get to travel too much to the out-of-state tracks, having a facility like this close to home is a big plus," He said. "One of the advantages is that the family can come and watch the races."

The horse park itself fulfills many purposes, facilitated by a unique three-way partnership among MSU, Starkville and Oktibbeha County.

"There is no other university in the state of Mississippi that has what we have here as far as this type of facility," Miller said. "It's the perfect mixture because we have the veterinary college, we have research scientists, and we have the Extension Service."

The first race following the reopening of the track was scheduled for Sept. 27, during the month harness season usually ends.

"We could not schedule a race early in the season because we didn't know when work on the track would be done," Miller said. "So now we've got to wait until the season almost comes to an end, so we can make sure that all of our local racers are back here to race."

Bell said there are other tracks in Mississippi for competitive racing, including one in Jackson. However, he took advantage of the horse park's new track for training after its opening ceremony, despite intermittent rain.

"You have to do it 7 days a week in rain, shine, sleet or snow; it's just like a job for me," Bell said. "You have to really want to do it to enjoy it."

Photo by Bob Ratliff