



Everything New Orleans

As New Orleans Fair Grounds experiences turf problems and purse cuts, competing tracks sense opportunity

By **Katherine Terrell, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune**

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Sammy Toups is a racetrack lifer.

Toups, who jokingly describes himself as a "gambling degenerate," has a fierce love for the Fair Grounds and horses.

One of the greatest moments of his life, Toups said, was when he got to stand in the winner's circle at Churchill Downs the day local trainer Al Stall won his first Breeders' Cup Classic with Blame.

Blame, the only horse to ever defeat Zenyatta, once trained at the Fair Grounds.

"I was a five-day-a-weeker," Toups said. "It's my passion. I never missed a Saturday or a Sunday. I was a weekend warrior."

But even Toups' love for the track has waned over the years as his dissatisfaction with the Fair Grounds grew. This season he has been to the track four times.

"I'm 55 years old, and I've been a very loyal customer," he said. "They don't know what customers are anymore."

That viewpoint reverberates in Iowa, where Maggi Moss, a Des Moines-based attorney, has been watching the situation with growing concern. Moss has been the leading owner at the Fair Grounds three straight seasons and is poised to win her fourth straight title this year.

A title that once meant so much to her has lost its luster, she said. When the ceremony takes place to give out the award at the end of the meet, it will probably have to go on without her.

"(Last year) it mattered and I was passionate and I was emotional," she said. "I thought, I've got to be leading owner at Fair Grounds, it mattered to me. ..."

"I flew there for the ceremony, that's a big deal. ... This year, I don't think they (other owners) can catch me. And I'm not even coming back. I don't mean that meanly, but nobody cares, so why would I take the time to care?"

Moss was third in the national owners standings last year. She is constantly recruited by other racetracks that would like to have her horses stabled in their barns.

If it weren't for her loyalty to the Fair Grounds, Moss said, she might have taken them up on the offers.

"When I go to Oaklawn, I know people care, you get treated great," she said.

MOUNTING DISSATISFACTION

As dissatisfaction with the Fair Grounds and its parent company Churchill Downs Inc. grows, even loyalists are beginning to voice their concerns. While CDI points to a national slippage in handle (amount wagered) plaguing the sport, Fair Grounds patrons and horsemen cite bad customer service, declining facilities and mediocre quality of racing among the issues that plague the company's New Orleans property.

And while the Fair Grounds struggles, other winter tracks are beginning to circle the waters. Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs, Ark., raised its purses twice this season. Gulfstream Park in Hallandale Beach, Fla., has invested several hundred million dollars in improvements to its facilities to attract the Breeders' Cup and will expand racing dates year-round.

Oaklawn Park doesn't offer the milder temperatures found in New Orleans or Florida, but it has been able to attract the fans. Business is booming as 30,873 people crammed into track on a rainy day this past weekend to watch the Rebel Stakes, which was won by Bob Baffert's 3-year-old Hoppertunity.

And while the Fair Grounds announced two purse decreases Jan. 10 and Feb. 23, Oaklawn has twice bumped up its purses. Oaklawn announced a second purse increase Feb. 21 after a holiday weekend that saw a 30 percent increase in the total handle from 2013.

"We have enjoyed consistent purse increases for 10 straight years now," Oaklawn Park racing secretary Pat Pope said in a statement. "So it's extremely gratifying we can make these increases so early in the season. It's always exciting to start a meet and have the fans and horsemen respond so enthusiastically."

The Blood Horse, a popular trade publication, reported Oaklawn has nearly doubled its purses since 2005.

Meanwhile, the Fair Grounds has started to lag behind other Louisiana tracks, Moss said, noting she made more money at Vinton's Delta Downs this season than at New Orleans' racetrack.

Moss ranked second in the owners standings with 18 wins from 32 starters during Delta Downs' season, which closed March 15. She made \$536,955 in purse money.

At the Fair Grounds, Moss will almost undoubtedly be leading owner for the fourth straight season. She has made \$459,489 with 57 starters as of March 18.

"I'm soon to be probably leading owner, and I'll probably be losing money," Moss said. "I was saved by Delta Downs."

As competing tracks trend up, the Fair Grounds has struggled in the eyes of its local horsemen.

"It's come to the point where we have pretty good competition as far as Oaklawn Park raising purses every few weeks and us dropping them. That could possibly cause us to lose some more stables, and we can't afford that," said Fair Grounds Hall of Fame trainer Bret Calhoun.

New Orleans Fair Grounds Hall of Fame trainer Bret Calhoun would like to see more investment in the track from Churchill Downs Inc. [NOLA.com](#) | [The Times-Picayune archive](#)

Field sizes have diminished and the Stall-Wilson turf course has been usable for about only half of the meet's races because of apparent drainage issues.

Fair Grounds trainers, ever skeptical of the condition of the course, have developed a mantra: "You're more likely to be on turf at Oaklawn."

Oaklawn Park has no turf course.

"Does anybody step back and say, 'What's wrong with this picture?' It's not even close," said Fair Grounds trainer Tom Amoss. "Everybody's business is booming but ours? That doesn't make any sense.

"Don't give me that weather (crap). That makes me want to throw up. Those people are dealing with the weather just like we are."

VISIBLE DECLINE

As the Fair Grounds approaches a decade under Churchill Downs Inc. ownership, those closest to the track say they're starting to see the cracks.

The infield video screen broke years ago and was never replaced.

"If you want to watch the race outside, you can't even hear the call, so you're just basically waiting to see them come down the stretch," said Patrick McGoey, a Fair Grounds patron and New Orleans-area lawyer. "There are TVs inside, but part of the experience is being out there. You can watch a race online all you want, but to me it's kind of a little sad and frustrating"

When asked by NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune if it intended to fix the video screen, Churchill Downs Inc. instead pointed to its other monitoring devices.

"There are over 700 televisions throughout the Fair Grounds facility all strategically placed for optimal viewing," Churchill Downs Inc. said. "These sets range from personalized tableside screens to top of the line large format high-definition screens."

It's not just that video screen, however. Patrons also have issues with the standard-definition screen above the paddock, noting it has become so blurry they can barely read it.

"It's not the same experience it used to be," McGoey said.

What it all adds up to is a lack of effort by CDI, said Fair Grounds trainer Steve Asmussen, a finalist for the National Museum of Racing's 2014 Hall of Fame class.

On any given day, there should be an acceptable number of mutuel clerks at the track, he said. A mutuel clerk, or teller, sells, checks and cashes tickets at a racetrack. They answer patrons' questions and can guide first-time bettors through the process of placing a wager.

Asmussen said on certain days he couldn't even find a clerk.

"I question their effort and commitment to horse racing," he said. "I shouldn't have to look so hard to find a teller."

It is the same story at the off-track betting parlors, Toups said.

"They cleaned house, there were no tellers over there," he said.

In response, Churchill Downs Inc. said the industry has changed enough over 10 years to necessitate certain cutbacks.

"It is well documented what has happened to handle over the past 10 years," Churchill Downs Inc. said. "Not only has there been a precipitous drop in overall volume, but much like banking, bill paying, and the consumption of newspaper and magazine content, more and more of it is shifting to self-service and online. Comparing the number of tellers at the track today versus 10 years ago is misguided."

The turf course, installed in 1981, has begun to show its age in recent years. For two straight seasons, about half of the scheduled races have come off the turf.

"If you spit across the infield, they take it off the turf," Toups said.

Over the course of the season, on average, a race taken off the turf shows about a 25 percent drop in handle.

There are a few reasons behind that, said McGoey, a passionate handicapper who won \$270,000 in the 2011 Breeders' Cup Betting Challenge.

When a race comes off the turf, the field size shrinks as trainers scratch their grass runners. A small field offers no value to a handicapper looking for a big bet.

And it's a head-scratcher for a handicapper, who doesn't always know how a turf horse will run on a dirt track.

It's just one of the reasons McGoey has started to play Gulfstream Park, Santa Anita and Delta Downs instead of his hometown track.

"The fields are horrible. The fields are too small," he said of the Fair Grounds. "You don't get any value, you don't get any people playing different horses."

As of March 9, the Fair Grounds' field size has averaged 7.83 horses. That number has decreased every month since the season opened in November, when it was 8.18. By February of last year the average field size was 8.2.

"Horseplayers are no different than business owners in that they are looking for a return on their investment and, as such, favor large field sizes over small ones," Churchill Downs Inc. wrote. "In a five or six horse field the opportunity for a big payday is far less than in one with 10 or 12.

"As operators, we don't own or enter horses, we produce the event. We need the cooperation of the horsemen to enter their horses in the races to maintain desired field sizes."

Average daily handle at the Fair Grounds in November and December also fell 16 percent compared to last season.

"There are times that (racing secretary Jason Boulet) struggles with trying to fill races," Fair Grounds President Tim Bryant said at a Louisiana Racing Commission meeting Feb. 17. "Our races our down. We have had about 17 less races this year."

That's been a frustration for trainers and owners alike who lose money when they can't find a race in which to place their horses.

"I have sent six horses to a farm in Kentucky to get ready for summer because they sat in the barn at the Fair Grounds, where they just trained and never ran," Moss said.

All things considered, there are numerous issues to be fixed, say horsemen. If things don't change, the future doesn't bode well, Calhoun said.

"This business is driven by wagering. If they're not wagering on them, there's no handle, and if there's no handle, there's no purse account," Calhoun said. "If bettors see (a bad card), they turn the page to a different track and sometimes they don't come back."

He added: "You can only hide behind the weather for so long. And it has been a factor for a couple of years, but that's not the whole story.

Calhoun said his hope is to see positive change to get the fans coming back and the trainers to stay.

"Hopefully we can lure some people down here next year, but there's going to have to be some commitments made," he said.

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