

Rillito Park Fifty Years of Horse Racing

It only looks like a race track. Actually, it's a fun factory called Rillito Park, where centuries-old traditions, scenic surroundings and local history combine with pageantry, roaring crowds and perhaps, a chance for personal enrichment.

We're talking speed, power and color here: the spectacle of quarter horses and Thoroughbreds, some of the world's finest four-legged athletes, running on a track that has made more than its fair share of contributions to the Sport of Kings - and cowboys.

The Thoroughbreds are now very much a part of the Rillito scene, but the heart and soul of the track is the American Quarter Horse. Always has been.

When the tack first opened in 1943, it was a simple dirt strip in the backyard of Ruken Jelks. Jelks and a friend from his student days at the University of Arizona, Mel Haskell, were breeding quarter horses. They needed a place to race them, and Rillito Park was born.

The track, which was the first regulated quarter horse facility in the United States, was an immediate sensation throughout the Southwest. To appreciate what this means, we need a brief lesson in equine history.

The prototype of the modern quarter horse dates to 1752, but it was during the nation's westward expansion that the breed made its mark on American history. Fast, tough, agile and intelligent, the quarter horse in the 19th century West was the cowboy's Cadillac. Along with half-wild cattle and the hardy men who worked them, the quarter horse was vital to making the lore and legend that the entire world takes to be an essential part of our national character. The American Quarter Horse Association boasts 300,000 members and 100,000 animals are added to its registry each year.

During its first season, Rillito Park set standards for racing quarter horses that define the sport even today. Chief among these was the chute system. The chute is a 3/4-mile, 45-foot straightaway of prepared dirt track. At Rillito, this is the stretch on the south side of the current oval, which was added in the 1950's to accommodate Thoroughbreds and trotters. It extends west along the entry drive. The quarter horses run directly in front of the grandstand and clubhouse, up close and personal. This arrangement now prevails everywhere the breed is raced.

Rillito Park also gave the racing industry an American slang the photo finish. As distances were standardized, a high-speed clock was placed at the finish line. In closely contested races, the photographs, showing both the horses and the clock, supplied absolute proof of the results. Today, the same system, in more sophisticated form, governs horse racing worldwide, determining winners and losers, both on the track and at the payoff windows.

There were some grand days at Rillito Park in the 1940s and 1950s. In one memorable race, four horses went into the gates for the World's Championship of quarter horses. The purse was \$1,000, giant money for the time. A mare named Shue Fly was the favorite. The touts figured she would have to fall down to lose. She did that very thing.

When the gates flew open, Shue Fly's owner, Bob Burns, hit her on the rump with his hat. The little mare was so startled that she fell to her knees. Then, she got up, closed the seven lengths between herself and the rest of the field, passed a horse named Nobodies Friend on the rail and won by the proverbial nose. Mr. Burns got the purse, and Shue Fly got immortality among people who know quarter horses. That's the sort of place Rillito Park is; there's a certain magic about it that makes anything possible, any time.

Tucson hit some economic speed bumps. Other forms of entertainment claimed the attention of locals and visitors alike. The horsemen whose personalities had energized local racing grew older. The track was closed and silent for several years.

By 1986, only ramshackle buildings and memories remained. The town had grown out and around the old track. Residential and commercial development threatened Rillito with demolition. But many Tucsonans still remembered the glory days. In a referendum, voters decided to save the park for racing.

After several false starts at resurrecting the park, another quarter horse breeder came to Rillito Park's rescue. Howard King, the president of the Pima County Horseman's Association, put together a coalition of volunteers, business people and elected officials. They cleaned up the dilapidated facilities, renovated the track, and on Saturday, January 23, 1988, racing returned to the Old Pueblo.

To mark the re-opening, more than 7,200 spectators turned out, breaking an attendance record set in 1953. The handle at the pari-mutuel windows was \$217,494, another record.

On the typical warm Saturday or Sunday, you can expect to find from 3,000 to 4,000 people in the stands for the card of 10 races. The Thoroughbreds run up to a mile (8 furlongs), while the usual distance for quarter horses is either 350 or 400 yards.

From the first post time at 1 p.m., the action is fast and furious. Whether you are a serious racing fan, a lover of elegant animals or a watcher of human crowds, there's more than enough to keep you fully occupied.

Very modest admission prices make a day at the track one of the best buys on the Tucson entertainment calendar.

They're running again at Rillito Park. You only have to be there to enjoy it.