



Rillito Racetrack Has Historical Significance

Rillito Downs Park Racetrack is a five-eighths mile racing in Tucson, Arizona. This recently remodeled track offers Quarterhorse, Thoroughbred and on occasion, even Arabian horse racing.

This famous track on the banks of the Rillito River was the birthplace of many racing innovations still in use today. The Southern Arizona Horse Breeders Association, the organization that pioneered Quarter Horse Racing in Tucson, had been hosting races at the Hacienda Moltacqua track since 1941. When Moltacqua was sold in 1943, J. Rukin Jelks volunteered to use the training track on his ranch.

Under the direction of Melville Haskell, an American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame inductee, and Van Smelker, who later became head of the AQHA Performance Department, SAHBA experimented with grading races, weighted handicaps, futurities, derbies and stake races, and photo-electric timers. World famous sprinters such as Shue Fly, Joe Reed II, Piggin String, Hard Twist, Queenie, and Miss Panama all ran at Rillito.



Famed Kentucky Derby winning trainer Bob Baffert's first Quarter Horse winner was Baron at Flagstaff, Arizona in 1971. His first Thoroughbred winner was Flipper Star on January 28, 1979 at Rillito Downs Park in Tucson, Arizona. Bob has since won two legs of the Triple Crown four times: with Silver Charm (1997 Kentucky Derby and Preakness), Real Quiet (1998 Kentucky Derby and Preakness), Point Given (2001 Preakness and Belmont) and War Emblem (2002 Kentucky Derby and Preakness).



Bob Baffert's Racing Background: The fourth of seven children, Baffert grew up on an Arizona cattle ranch near the Mexican border town of Nogales, and got started in the horse business grooming and galloping Quarter Horses owned by his father. After graduating from high school in 1971, took a year to pursue his dream of becoming a jockey. He won 30 races, but grew tired of trying to maintain jockey weight, so he enrolled at University of Arizona's Horse Racing program. Later, after a year of working different jobs following his college graduation, put together a small string of Quarter Horses at Rillito Downs in Tucson.



"Truly Historic" Tucson's Rillito Park

The Quarter Horse Journal

There are a lot of old building and ancient tracks of land around Southern Arizona that some people like to describe as historic. With a nation so (compared to Europe), Americans love to call a 100-year-old anything "historic" while our European counterparts talk about buildings that are

thousands of years old.

Although Rillito Park is nearing its 50th anniversary, it is truly an historic location and has papers to prove it. After all, Rillito was designated a national historic landmark in 1988. But more about that later.

Quarter horse racing has been around since the breed was established as early as 1665. Quarter horses were small, tough and able, and were generally used to bear the burdens of farmers and herdsman.

So tough were they that on their "day off" they provided their owners with "speed horses" which meant racing! In those days, thoroughbreds were solely the province of the very well to do.

When Americans headed West, they brought with them the American quarter horse. The horse worked well on western cow ranges. Long before exotic licensing and promotional arrangements were established, the American promotional arrangements were established, the American quarter horse became the "official" horse of the West.

In the late thirties, Tucson was growing and the University of Arizona was developing as one of the great institutions of the Southwest. A couple of University students, Ruken Jelks and Mel Haskell, were disappointed by the supply of good quarter horses in the area, so the the two began breeding their own.

In 1943, Jelks, in need of a place to race horses, carved a track out of west desert land in his backyard on River Road. He was helped by his friend, M.H. Haskell.

The racing expert in town was Bob Locke. He was asked to contribute his racing expertise, and they found a man names Jake Meyer to serve as starter. Rillito Park was born!

Aside from establishing a place to run, Rillito Park became the talk of the Southwest, as it was the first regulated quarter horse facility in the Untied States. In its first season alone, Rillito set a number of standards that are being used in quarter horse racing to this day.

Most important was the establishment of the "chute system." First appearing in 1943, the chute is a 3/8-mile straight stretch of prepared dirt track. It is 45 feet wide. At Rillito Park, it is the straight leg on the south of the current oval and extends west along the entry drive.

To this day, quarters horses race on a straight track.

The oval track was added at Rillito in the late 1950s to expand the use of the facility for trotters and thoroughbreds.

Another of Rillito's contributions to the industry was the photo finish. Standardization of the races, a decision on the length of the race, and the introduction of a photoelectric tower became important. A high-speed clock was placed at the finish line, and the finish was filmed with a movie camera. Frame-by-frame examination of the photographs, which showed the horses and the time, enabled precise timing. Although crude by modern standards, the use of the photo finish was developed at Rillito.

Mel Haskell's record keeping during the first season at Rillito led to the establishment of the American Quarter Horse Racing Association. Begun in 1945, both Haskell and Jelks became founding members of the young organization. One of the main purposes of the AQHA was to push rules that had been in use for races organized by Jelks and Haskell at Rillito. For all of his efforts Haskell was recognized as "the father of modern quarter horse racing" and inducted into the American Quarter Horse Race Association Hall of Fame.

Many great stories of Rillito Park are not confined to its founders and administrators. Of course,

with great quarter horses on hand, some of the best stories feature the horses themselves.

The most remembered race happened on February 18, 1942, when four contenders went to the gates for the World's Championship Quarter. The purse was \$1,000, and the four horses were Shue Fly, Clabber, Joe Tom, and Nobodies Friend. These four were easily the greatest sprinters of that season. Shue Fly was the favorite, as no horse in the race was conceded a chance to outrun her unless she fell down -- which is exactly what she did!

As the gate flew open, the mare's owner, Bob Burris, was standing just behind her, and he hit her with his hat. This startled her so, that Shue Fly fell to her knees. But the jockey stayed on, hauled her to her feet, and took off, a full seven lengths behind the field!

In the excited crowd were people from 14 different states, and all were shouting encouragement. And Shue Fly responded, as she began to level out and try to catch the three horses in front her. No one would have given her a chance, with everyone sure she was too far back to make it. But the little mare didn't give up, and she did make it, not only catching the pack but leaving it behind to come through on the rail, passing Nobodies Friend to win by a nose, equalling her record of the previous year. The crowd went absolutely wild!

While Rillito experienced the gold days in the thirties, forties, and fifties, in the late sixties and seventies the track hit some hard times. Between the up and down nature of Tucson's economy and other forms of competition, Rillito sat closed for many years during that era. Threatened by housing and retail development, voters in 1984 overwhelmingly decided that Rillito Park was to remain a horse facility. A bulldozer would not be allowed to fell the quaint facility.

Buoyed by that in the middle eighties, a real estate firm named JNC purchased the rights to operate the track. However, JNC was quite troubled and subsequently closed.

The Pima County Horsemen's Association, led by Howard King, Bert Kinerk, Bucky Lovejoy and others raced to the rescue, and in 1988 opened the track for Pima County Fair racing. The success of the track that year was overwhelming.

After the first year, an investor group opened the track for two years, hoping to establish full professional meets at Rillito. However, once again, economic circumstances did not contribute to success.

Finally, King's group reached an agreement with the Pima County Fair Racing Commission and has signed a notice that will allow the Pima County Horsemen's Association to operate Rillito Park though at least 1997.

There is high hope that Rillito Park will once again take center stage in the world of quarter horse racing. Discussions are underway about a plan to stage a very important race at Rillito each December -- the world's fastest quarter horse race.

It would be fitting to stage such an historic event at Rillito Park. After all, it truly is an historic place!

Rillito Park Race Track's season lasts the months of January to March, with a live racing schedule on Saturdays and Sundays. The property has two restaurants, ADA accessible facilities, grandstand, barns, training area, special events, soccer/multi-use fields, picnic areas, ramadas, restrooms, and drinking water. All with the beautiful mountain foothills as the back drop.



Historical landmark of horse racing for more than 50 years!