

MIDWEST/CANADA



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BY 2010 EARNINGS

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Running at the River

River Downs, situated on the banks of the Ohio River near Cincinnati, opens April 16 for its 86th season

BY TOM LaMARRA

A manhole cover between the clubhouse and paddock tells the tale. It reads "1925 Union Gas and Electric Co."

That was the year Coney Island racetrack held its first meet adjacent to the Ohio River just east of Cincinnati, Ohio. And, like the utility company, the track eventually changed its name and continues operating today.

River Downs, which will race for the 86th consecutive season in 2010, is a gem as racetracks go. The old photographs on the walls of the clubhouse show scenes from decades ago that really aren't much different than scenes of today.

If the glass that encloses the two levels of the clubhouse were removed, the structure would look like it did 50 years ago, save for some touch-ups. The view from the grandstand hasn't changed much, either: The Ohio River and the hills of Northern Kentucky frame the backstretch; the manicured infield and turf course are always green in spring, summer, and fall.

River Downs isn't lost in time; improvements have been made over the years. Aesthetically, time has been rather kind. Trends in the pari-mutuel industry, however, have not.

In recent years rumors have circulated that the track would be sold or even closed, a product of the decline of horse racing in Ohio. The 2009 Thoroughbred meet almost



The manicured River Downs turf course is always lush green in spring, summer, and fall

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Rank	Stallion (Foaling Year, Sire), Farm Standing	2010 Stud Fee Can\$	Rnrs/Wnrs	Stakes Wnrs/Wns	Rstrot SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2010 Earnings	Cumulative			
								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	SLIGO BAY (IRE) (98, Sadler's Wells), Adena Springs/Gardiner Farms	\$6,000	56/10	1/2	0/1	(Bourbon Bay, \$208,800)	\$407,218	*190	5	1.13	1.79
2	ALPHABET SOUP (91, Cozzene), Adena Springs/Gardiner Farms	\$6,000	87/26	0/0	0/0	(Souper Sweet, \$34,388)	\$395,074	*675	37	1.37	1.43
3	MILWAUKEE BREW (97, Wild Again), Adena Springs/Gardiner Farms	\$12,500	66/18	0/0	0/0	(Milwaukee Action, \$45,080)	\$378,360	266	8	1.44	1.53
4	SKIMMING (96, Nureyev), Pacific Stud	N/A	45/19	1/1	0/1	(Asanti, \$50,856)	\$366,009	267	12	0.88	1.19
5	GILDED TIME (90, Timeless Moment), Bar None Ranches	\$7,500	60/11	0/0	0/0	(Gayego, \$40,000)	\$289,832	*1103	46	1.41	1.73
6	CAPE CANAVERAL (96, Mr. Prospector), Highfield Stock Farm	\$5,000	56/14	0/0	0/0	(Cape Hatchet, \$51,240)	\$259,783	309	17	1.24	1.37
7	EXPLICIT (97, Distant View), Winsome Acres	\$3,000	27/8	0/0	0/0	(Top Feeling, \$75,600)	\$191,484	147	4	0.85	0.89
8	GOLD LEGEND (90, Seattle Slew), Esquirol Farms	\$2,500	26/7	1/2	1/1	(Coyote Legend, \$111,000)	\$176,877	367	19	1.30	1.19
9	KISSIN KRIS (90, Kris S.), Esquirol Farms	\$3,000	27/4	0/0	0/0	(Delightful Kiss, \$55,160)	\$160,164	441	15	1.14	1.18
10	PIKEPASS (96, Forty Niner), Mountainview Farms	\$3,500	41/7	0/0	0/0	(Hayn Dawg, \$35,790)	\$143,016	244	4	0.74	0.95

*A-E and COMPARABLE INDEX: The lifetime Average-Earnings Index indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned, on the average, in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00. The Comparable Index indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AEI higher than their mares Comparable Index.

didn't happen, though the threat was more fiction than fact.

Unlike many other tracks that sit on valuable land, River Downs has built-in environmental protection. It sits on a flood plain, and the property really can't be used for much of anything else.

That's the good news for horsemen and fans of Thoroughbred racing in the greater Cincinnati market.

"In the aspect of being a part of the fabric of Cincinnati, this track really stands out," said John Engelhardt, the longtime publicist at River Downs, one of three Thoroughbred tracks in Ohio. "It has really retained its beauty. It's like an old shoe. You get comfortable with it.

"What I love is when someone comes for the first time. They see the purses and don't expect much, but they'll come out and say, 'This place is gorgeous.' It's neat to hear people's take on the facility because they weren't expecting what they see."

Interestingly, River Downs didn't pick up the moniker "Saratoga of the Midwest." *American Racing Manual* advertisements from the 1950s called it "beautiful" and the home of top horses, trainers, and jockeys.

The track that called itself "Little Saratoga" was Hamilton, the Butler County Fair track northwest of Cincinnati. Thoroughbred racing was held on a half-mile track for about three weeks in the

summer. Hamilton, which last held county fair harness racing, hasn't offered horse racing since the late 1990s.

Cincinnati racing predated River Downs at Oakley Race Course. There was a 15-year gap between the closing of Oakley and the opening of River Downs, which quickly found its place in racing history.

The first horse to set foot on the track in 1925 was Black Gold, who still holds the record for having won the most derbies. Black Gold, however, never raced at River Downs.

Seabiscuit did, however. In 1936, when fall racing was held at River Downs, Seabiscuit made two October starts: He finished third in the Western Hills Handicap and two weeks later finished third in the East Hills Handicap during his 3-year-old campaign.

A year earlier two speedball 3-year-olds that had forged quite a rivalry—the gelding Clang and the filly Myrtlewood—met in an October match race at River Downs, with Clang winning by a nose in track- and world-record time of 1:09½ for six furlongs. Just three weeks earlier Myrtlewood had defeated Clang by a nose in a match race at Hawthorne Park.

The late Richard Bailey, a popular local clocker in Kentucky and Ohio, is said to be the first person to break the color barrier

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								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	CHIEF SEATTLE (97, Seattle Slew), WinRich Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	53/15	2/3	1/2	(Bold Chieftain, \$284,000)	\$529,853	*354	10	1.24	1.37
2	INDY KING (99, A.P. Indy), Richwine Farm	\$1,000	36/10	0/0	0/0	(Pleasant Prince, \$171,010)	\$363,432	102	3	1.00	0.89
3	ZAVATA (00, Phone Trick), Foot Fall Farm	\$1,500	44/8	1/1	0/1	(Dakota Phone, \$126,720)	\$265,853	*196	2	0.97	1.15
4	FOREST DANGER (01, Forestry), WinRich Thoroughbreds	N/A	31/11	0/0	0/0	(Seaside Fortune, \$43,200)	\$224,099	124	0	0.58	1.60
5	SPANISH STEPS (01, Unbridled), Foot Fall Farm	\$3,500	29/12	0/0	0/0	(Closing Steps, \$35,800)	\$204,665	121	2	0.95	1.46

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at the River Downs track kitchen. As the story goes, one morning Bailey, who was black, sat down and said: "If I'm good enough to clock your horses, I'm good enough to eat in here."

Over the years the track has launched the careers of many jockeys and trainers, in part because of its proximity to Kentucky. Jockeys who won their first race at River Downs include Rafael Bejarano, Steve Cauthen, James Graham, John McKee, and Larry Snyder; some of the trainers who did the same are Neil Howard, Larry Jones, and Ken McPeck.

Cauthen, from Kentucky, won his first race May 17, 1976, aboard Red Pipe. In just a few months he was the leading rider at River Downs, and two years later he became the youngest jockey to win the Triple Crown, with Affirmed.

The most prominent race in recent years at the Ohio track has been the Cradle Stakes, a Labor Day fixture for 2-year-olds. The 1984 edition was won by Spend a Buck, who in 1985 won the Ken-

tucky Derby (gr. I) and earned Horse of the Year honors.

Floods also are part of River Downs' history. The Ohio River flood of 1937 forced renovations and led to the track's current name. A serious flood in 1968 forced the cancellation of eight days of racing and generated discussion a year later about moving the track to another location in Cincinnati.

Other floods have occurred over the years, with another bad one in March 1997, when several feet of water filled the first floor of the newly renovated clubhouse and caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage.

The floodwaters, however, also are beneficial. When they cover the dirt and turf courses, they leave behind silt that serves as excellent fertilizer for the grass.

In the 1980s and 1990s the free entertainment at River Downs included watching the families of black and white swans that called the infield lake their home. An avid bird lover, the late War-

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- Sire of IN-Bred **HURRY HOME WARREN** (\$174,005) – won Santa Anita's Harry Henson S. and MSW winner @6.5F in 1:13.
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2010 Fee: \$1,500 Live Foal / Stands & Nurses

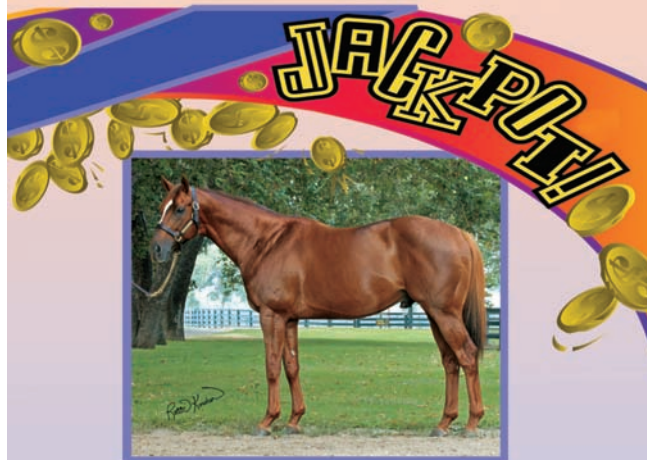


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FEWER DAYS, HIGHER PURSES SOUGHT BY MANAGEMENT

River Downs will begin its live meet April 16, but its schedule beyond that remains up in the air in early April as track management and horsemen negotiated purses and racing dates.

The Ohio State Racing Commission awarded River Downs 104 dates for 2010, but track general manager Jack Hanessian, in early February, said fewer days could result in higher purses. The Ohio Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association board of directors twice rejected a reduction in dates, but the votes were close.

Hanessian said he intended to poll horsemen after most of them were on site to prepare for the meet, which as usual extends through Labor Day. Hanessian wants to race four days a week instead of five.

The current schedule calls for racing Fridays through Tuesdays. Hanessian indicated he'd like to drop Tuesdays. On most days River Downs will partner with Thistledown near Cleveland on the "7&7" program—each track runs seven races to make for a 14-race program.

The purse swing would be substantive. If the current schedule remains intact, River Downs would offer about \$37,000 a day in purses, the lowest amount in more than two decades. By racing 80 days, the

daily average would increase to \$47,000. In 2009 River Downs paid \$43,000 a day in overnight purses for a 104-day meet.

"It's horrible. It's awful," Hanessian said of the prospect of lower purses and shorter fields.

Pari-mutuel handle at River Downs last year was impacted by field size, which fell to 7.23 horses per race, according to The Jockey Club Information Systems.

There are other considerations. If River Downs and the Ohio HBPA don't sign a two-party agreement, the track won't be permitted to import full-card simulcasts in 2011 under Ohio statute. The track could, however, offer its live meet this year without an agreement in place.

OSRC chairman Willie Koester said he believes the full commission would alter racing dates at River Downs should the track and horsemen agree on a reduction.

Through March 27, on-site handle at the three Thoroughbred tracks in Ohio was down 15.2% from the first three months of 2009. River Downs alone was down 12.3% for the period. *By Tom LaMarra*

ren Wolf, who served as racing secretary, would raise them in his office and then move them to the infield.

The birds were so popular they had races named for them: The Black Swan and White Swan stakes. But things eventually took a turn for the worse as the swans expanded their territory to include the turf course.

Occasionally, Deb Gore, who called the charts at River Downs and chronicled its horses and personalities in *Daily Racing Form*, would summarize a horse's race with the note, "Jumped swan." And the jockeys weren't the only ones that had their hands full.

"The swans started to get comfortable, but also aggressive," Engelhardt said. "(Outrider) Bobby Pate used to go out to chase them off, but they'd end up going after the ponies."

Some geese still are in the lake, but the swans are long gone.

Wolf also had a turkey he would give to a trainer to care for until he won a race. If he did win a race, the trainer got to give the turkey to another trainer, and so it went throughout each meet.

River Downs is unusual in that, though located in Ohio, it was adopted by another state as far as the racing program goes. Kentucky owners, trainers, and jockeys have raced there on a regular basis for decades, though in recent years, economics has lessened their presence.

In the early 1980s, when Churchill Downs experimented with summer racing, there were days when River Downs outdrew and out-handled the Louisville landmark. In those pre-simulcast days it was common for racing fans in Central Kentucky to make the trip to Cincinnati.

Also, River Downs and Latonia Race Course, now called Turfway Park, formed an almost year-round live racing circuit that remains in place today. The two tracks have competed for simulcast customers but don't overlap their live race meets.

Annual pari-mutuel handle in Ohio has declined by more than \$300 million in the past 10 years, and River Downs hasn't been spared. The open stakes program is gone with the exception of the Cradle and Bassinet stakes, and purses, which last year didn't average \$50,000 a day, aren't attracting as many horses from across the Ohio River.

Engelhardt believes it's all about money. If River Downs ever was to get racetrack gaming—it remains a possibility in 2010—it could rekindle interest, he said.

"I've had people at Keeneland approach me and say, 'If you could only get your purses up, I'd have a stable at River Downs,'" Engelhardt said. "Kentucky horsemen will tell you River Downs is one of the toughest places to win a race."

"It's close to Kentucky training centers, and there is the circuit with Turfway, which offers summer stabling. The Ohio River is not the Atlantic Ocean. You're right there."

Since 1975 River Downs has been owned by a California syndicate that purchased it for \$7.7 million from Joy Tweel, who a year earlier bought the track for \$5.1 million. Some members of the syndicate have died, but it's still headed by George Gaulding Jr., who led the 1975 purchase.

Several casino companies have expressed interest in or have made offers on River Downs the last few years, given the prospect of racetrack gaming in Ohio. As of late March no deal or partnership had been announced, and the issue of video lottery terminals at racetracks remained tied up in court. **U**

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