



THE BIG PAYOUT

Seattle-area horse racing nearly died. Now it's better than ever.

As long shots go, the mere fact that Emerald Downs is a growing, thriving part of the Seattle sports scene is worth considering.

Horse racing here was on life support in the early '90s when Longacres closed and in typical Northwest fashion people discussed and debated what should happen next. Political wrangling and public outcry became the new daily double.

On a chilly autumn day in 1994 horse owner Dr. Dean Essex had a barbecue at his Granite Falls ranch. Horsemen and women gathered and, one by one, spoke about hanging in at a time when nothing about their industry was certain. Frustration was the dominant emotion but the passion that's inherent to the people in

this business was also on display. Fourteen years later that passion is rewarded by a track that continues to beat the odds.

(It's worth remembering that one of the objections to building Emerald Downs was concern about the environmental impact of a track. Next time you're flying into Sea-Tac from the south take a gander at Auburn. One of the few patches of green left? The infield at Emerald Downs.)

Three years of no racing took a huge toll. Those who survived did so with significantly depleted resources. Emerald Downs finally opened in the summer of 1996 and it was fair to wonder if the sport could ever bounce back.

Slowly, with a determination unique

to the type of person attracted to this sport, the track began to grow. Purses crept higher. More owners earned more money. In 1996, seven owners were able to earn more than \$100,000 in a season of racing at Emerald Downs. Last year that number grew to 13.

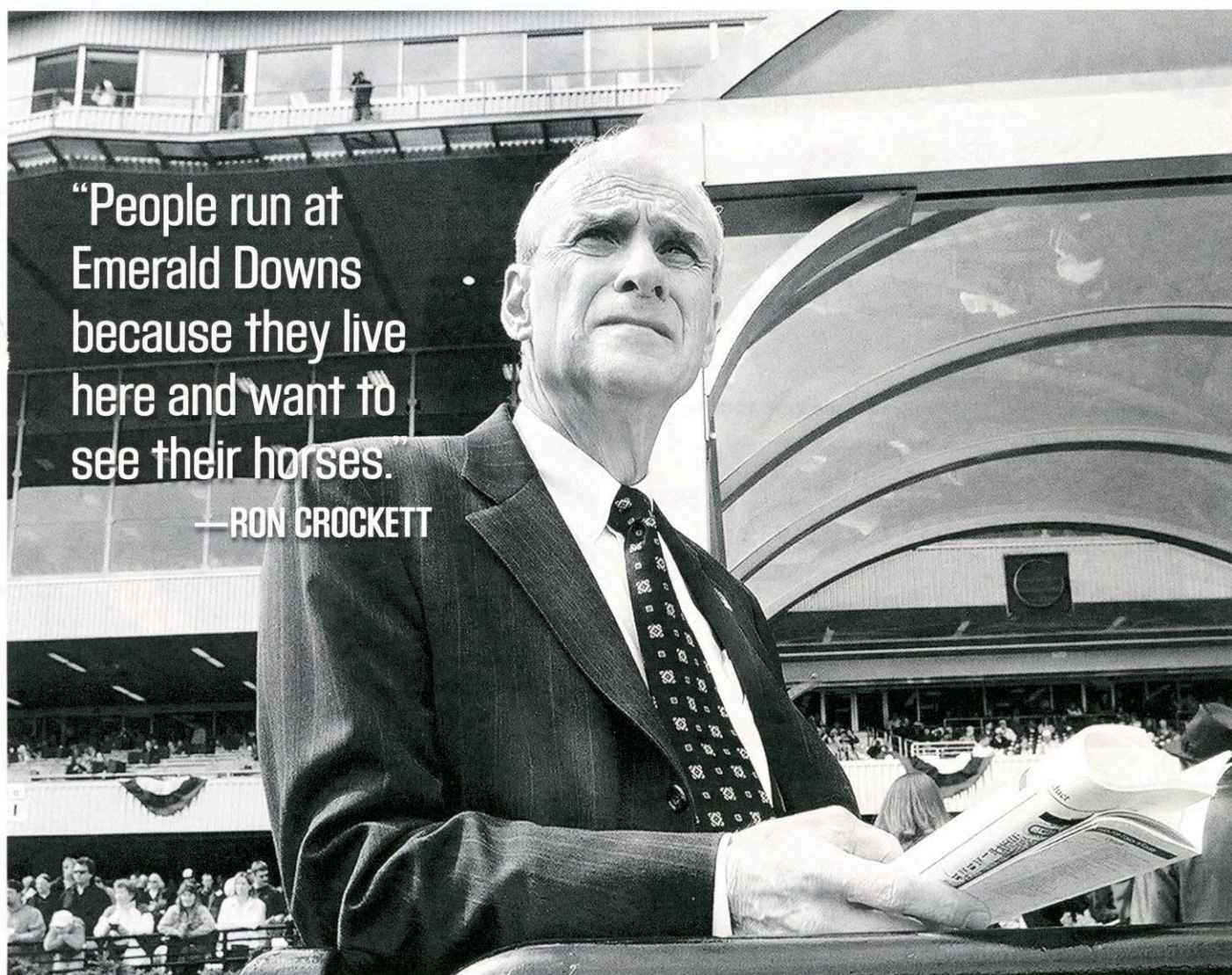
More money naturally leads to better horses. Better horses mean better racing. That leads to more fan interest, which leads to more money. It's a very simple equation.

Emerald Downs president Ron Crockett says the quality of horse at the track has improved due in part to convenience.

"We've got people who run at Emerald Downs because they live here and want to see their horses run."

But it doesn't hurt that the money's >





“People run at Emerald Downs because they live here and want to see their horses.”

—RON CROCKETT

gotten better. Purses have increased from \$62,000 a day in 1997 to \$116,000 per day in 2008, which means \$10.5 million in total purses. That led to this: It's become increasingly likely that when you visit Emerald Downs you'll see a horse with a shot at making national headlines.

Last year, Smarty Deb, Café Tortoni, Margo's Gift and Gallon finished 1, 2, 3, 4 in the Gottstein Futurity on the last day of Emerald Downs' summer meet. Less than a month later they were making headlines coast to coast.

Smarty Deb became the first horse in Emerald Downs history to qualify for the Breeders' Cup. She won four races in four Auburn starts last summer.

She parlayed her win in the Gottstein Futurity into an appearance at Monmouth Park in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies race, where she finished

fifth. Her big day came 24 hours after an impressive display by Northwest horses in three races on two coasts.

On October 26, Smarty Deb's stablemate Margo's Gift won a Breeders' Cup race in New Jersey. Margo's Gift was a three-time stakes winner at Emerald Downs.

Just ten minutes after Margo's Gift paid 26 to 1 in New Jersey, Café Tortoni won a one-mile allowance race at Bay Meadows in California. About an hour later Gallon won a turf race at the same track.

Smarty Deb will run in Southern California this season but the other three horses will be back. They'll be joined by 2007 Longacres Mile winner The Great Face and the track's all-time leading money winner Flamethrowintexan, who won the Mile in 2006. Finally, four-time stakes winner Shampoo returns after dominating

the three-year-old fillies last year.

Speaking of stakes races, the minimum purse for the 35 stakes races at Emerald Downs this year has been raised from \$45,000 to \$50,000. That's important because winners of any stakes race in the country are listed in sales books in bold type or so-called "black type." The bolder typeface is to indicate horses of superior quality for prospective buyers and/or breeders. This year, every horse that wins a stakes race at Emerald Downs will qualify for that distinction.

In addition, the Breeders' Cup's new "Win and You're In" program will include the Longacres Mile. The winner of this August's race will automatically qualify for the Breeders' Cup Mile in October at Santa Anita. In addition to whetting the appetite of locals, this should lead to a talented group of shippers from around >



the country for the race.

2008 will also see the continuation of Emerald Downs' unique partnership with the Muckleshoot Tribe. They have supplemented purses at the track, which sits on land they own, since 2004. This year they'll provide 11% of the purse total.

"They're terrific people," Crockett says. "They have a vested interest in the success of the track as our landlord. They want us to be healthy."

The two parties also share a desire to keep other forms of gambling out of Emerald Downs. Many tracks have been forced to add card rooms or slot machines to draw fans. The Muckleshoots would prefer people interested in those activities come to their casino. And Crockett has maintained from day one that Emerald Downs will stand on its own merit as long as he's calling the shots. That means horse

racing will pay the bills.

"Our on-track attendance competes favorably with other, similar-sized tracks," he points out proudly.

It's May, the time of year when everyone becomes a horse racing fan for at least a few weeks. But for Northwest fans it's the beginning of another season of great racing in our backyard. Record purses and nationally prominent horses. A guaranteed slot into the Breeders Cup.

It all seemed far-fetched on that autumn day in Granite Falls. As a visitor approached Dr. Essex to thank him for inviting him to the barbecue he extended his hand. "Don't bet against these folks," he said.

Talk about a hot tip. *SNW*

Mike Gastineau can be heard weekdays from 3 to 7pm on KJR-AM. His favorite all time athlete is Secretariat, because he never hit anyone, never ran around on his wife, and never blamed the media.

Scuba Diving Lessons

*Second class diving at
First class rates*

piratepete@drowningfish.com

The Blarney Stone
Seattle, WA
Pub and Restaurant

*Neighborhood
Sports Bar &
Great Food*

4 Wide Screen TVs
Wii • Pool Tables • Steel Tip Darts

Beers on Tap • Irish Whiskey

HAPPY HOUR DAILY 4-7pm

LIVE BLUES Tuesday and Saturday

www.BlarneyStoneSeattle.com
1909 3rd Avenue • Seattle
(corner of 3rd and Stewart)
206-448-8439