

Surely this racetrack can't be in the US

They compete for more prize money every day they race at Kentucky Downs than they do at any other track in North America. But that's not the only way this delightful racecourse is unique, as Ken Snyder discovered.

The picturesque first turn at Kentucky Downs. Everything about it says 'Europe'; very little says 'America'. Picture: Ken Snyder

KENTUCKY DOWNS IN FRANKLIN — a rock's throw from the Tennessee state line and a turf-only racecourse — brands itself as 'European-style'. Given the layout of this unusual course and the success of European riders here, it might as well be in Europe.

The course would remind anyone of rural Ireland, with rails set in the land as it was found — no grading (and no filling in of a natural pond in the infield, either).

Racing results would also convince you there is a 'home court' (to use an American basketball term) advantage for European riders. On opening day of this year's five-day meet, an Englishman (Adam Beschizza), an Irishman (James Graham), and two Frenchmen (Florent Geroux and Julien Leparoux) dominated the card, winning seven of the ten races.

For the latter two jockeys, it was history repeating itself, involving what has become

known among Downs patrons as 'The French Connection' after the Oscar-winning movie of the 1970s. Geroux won four races on the day, continuing success that vaulted him to the top in purse earnings at last year's meet. Before that he was the leader in wins from 2014 to 2016, yielding the crown to Leparoux in 2017. At this year's meet, he finished second behind Puerto Rican Jose Ortiz, with Leparoux fourth, Beschizza fifth and Graham eighth.

It is no small wonder European riders do well here. Tail-on-fire, North American-style gate riding for early position is one hindering factor for native jockeys. "It is a bit alien for a trainer to tell a jockey to 'take back' [out of the gate], especially a born-and-bred American jockey that's been riding for 20 years. It's not going to come natural to them," said Beschizza, who had never raced on dirt before coming to America in the last few months of 2017.



“You’re better off, from our roots, to let a horse ‘find their feet,’” he said, advice literally and figuratively foreign to North American riders. “You can relax and let the horse take you rather than force the position.

“I do love it around here,” added Beschizza. His feelings for Kentucky Downs are not surprising: This year, he booted home five winners and had earnings of more than \$600,000.

T-BONE STEAK

The success of European riders is just one of many things unique and exceptional about Kentucky Downs. First, the shape of the mile-and-five-sixteenths (1m 2½f) course is not oval but roughly the shape of a T-bone steak — wide at one end narrowing to short, somewhat tighter book-ending home and back stretches at the other. The latter stretch includes a slight right-hand bend, one of only two on American racetracks (Santa Anita has the other.)

“When horses go down the back stretch, they actually veer to the outside rail,” said Rick Albright, stakes coordinator for Kentucky Downs.

An overhead view of the paddock: a scene that looks more rural Ireland than it does Kentucky. Picture: Ken Snyder

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Beschizza compares it to Formula One racing, where drivers chicane into turns. The most obvious difference for American racegoers is the shallow dips, inclines, and sundry undulations.

The other differentiator is the atmosphere, described as ‘country fair’ by both Albright and Ted Nicholson, senior vice-president and general manager of Kentucky Downs. There is no grandstand or even bleachers. Patrons bring their own canvas seats or vie for spots on picnic-table benches and under large tents provided by the track. New this year was an open-air Finish Line Pavilion for patrons paying \$35 per person and offering an all-day buffet.

Country fair in the US suggests eating and, in truth, the setting looks and feels almost like a giant picnic with horse races incidental to food and chatting with friends. The rural location also brings out numerous families with small children who seem to be there for a day in the sunshine as much as anything.

Del Mar, Saratoga and Keeneland in America; the Curragh in Ireland; Ascot and Cheltenham in England — they have their devotees, and deservedly so, but there’s a common denominator: they are all racetracks. Kentucky Downs is a folksy, relaxed, and quaint gathering akin to that of old, one-day meets in Ireland, rural England, or Australia.

Appearances, and atmosphere, however, can be deceiving: Kentucky Downs has the highest daily purse average in North America and second highest in the world — approximately \$2.3 million.

WHERE THE MONEY COMES FROM

The source of massive revenue for Kentucky Downs’ purses is mid-way on the course’s home stretch in a large building housing Historical Horse Racing (HHR) machines and, more important, players at every machine.

Players place trifecta bets on three races selected randomly by each machine from somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 races from as far back as the 1980s. Patrons are not playing against the house, as with slot machines, but each other, just as in pari-mutuel wagering at any race track. Hence, the machines are technically not ‘slots’, making them legal as Kentucky is a non-casino state.

Revenue is so large from the HHRs, Kentucky Downs shares a portion of it with other racetracks in the state to benefit the entire racing circuit. “It started with about a half-million dollars that we had extra,” said Nicholson of sharing that began four years ago. This year, track management, working with the Kentucky Horsemen’s Benevolent & Protective Association (KHBPA), transferred \$5 million of ‘extra’ to Ellis Park, a racetrack two hours north in Henderson, Kentucky.

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Top: At three furlongs, this is a particularly long home stretch for America, and it’s certainly not a straight line. Picture: Ken Snyder

Middle: Patrons in the ‘Finish Line Pavilion’: For \$35 there’s an all-you-can eat buffet — hotdogs, hamburgers, fries, that sort of thing, and a very good barbecued pork, a specialty in this part of the US. Photo: Ken Snyder

Bottom: Country fair-style atmosphere: Kentucky Downs looks and feels almost like a giant picnic with horse races in between. Picture: Ken Snyder



“That difference really helps a Kentucky horseman to say, ‘I’m going to run at Ellis Park for the July and August days instead of going up to Saratoga.’”

Horsemen and horsewomen spending the summer in Kentucky translate into more horses running for more money and more customers pursuing higher wagering payouts. This includes Kentucky Downs with large fields averaging more than 11 starters per race and high-quality Thoroughbreds that might also be in Saratoga for that racetrack’s summer meet.

Before the introduction of HHRs in 2011, the track began, primarily, as a simulcast racing facility in 1990 to draw people from Nashville, 40 miles away. Kentucky state law stipulated one thing for the facility: to simulcast, there had to be racing and pari-mutuel betting — even if it was only one race for one day every year.

That initially turned out to be one day of steeplechase racing (as Americans universally refer to jump racing) at what was then the Dueling Grounds before it became Kentucky Downs. (More on that original name later).

That event, in hindsight, was maybe a precursor of things to come with flat-race purses years later. The course hosted the 2¾-mile Dueling Grounds International that day, still the richest steeplechase race in American history with a \$750,000 purse, said Albright, who was at that race. Two years later, the track switched to Thoroughbred flat racing.

Top: The purse fund was \$500,000 for the Gainesway Farm Juvenile Stakes on the opening day. No wonder jockey Miguel Mena is so happy with his victory aboard the Mark Casse-trained Peace Achieved. Picture: Coady Photography



Bottom: Another win for France-born Julien Lejaroux, one of the most successful riders at Kentucky Downs in recent years. Here he scores on the Steve Asmussen-trained Snapper Sinclair in the \$750,000 Tourist Mile. Picture: Coady Photography

Watching the action in the sunshine: Kentucky Downs is rural to the core and country folk predominate. Picture: Coady Photography

For novices, the question is why only five race days? The answer, as most British and Irish racefans know, is wear and tear on a turf course. “You want to be running on clean ground; you want racing to be safe,” said Nicholson.

“For us to run more days, we would have to give the course four or five days to get back to where it’s safe and it’s not churned up,” said Albright, not possible currently with a short window of racing dates sandwiched between Ellis Park’s summer racing and a September meet at Churchill Downs in Louisville.

The management is able, however, to typically schedule a limited number of consecutive weekend days. This helps add to a growing number of fans flying into Nashville from all parts of the US to watch premier racing fields with high wagering payouts in a singularly special setting.

THE DUELING GROUNDS

If Kentucky Downs is a little slice of racing heaven in the milieu of today’s big-city tracks with multi-tiered grandstands, it also has a small slice of amazing history connected to it. The Kentucky-Tennessee border south of Franklin runs straight as a die from east to west ... except for an odd triangular cut dipping less than a half-mile deep into Tennessee on which Kentucky Downs sits.

Legend has it that the irregularity was to keep an establishment, the Sanford-Duncan Inn, within Kentucky state lines. That had to do with Kentucky allowing duels into the 19th century, which Tennessee had outlawed in 1801. The inn offered overnight accommodations for Tennesseans traveling north to legally protect their honor and access to the nearby ‘dueling grounds’, hence the original name for the race course.

So numerous were the duels, the inn is reported to have kept a doctor on hand for the wounded, and a full-time secretary was necessary to handle the volume of bookings for arriving duelists.

Among them was a notable figure from American history, Sam Houston, who survived a duel to go on to become the founding father of Texas. Kentucky later passed its own anti-dueling law and a subsequent law with a provision stating no elected state official could have been a participant in a duel. (The governor’s oath of office to this day includes this provision.)

It is easy to miss the inn, still standing, because it is just past Kentucky Downs on the road from the nearby interstate highway.

Kentucky Downs is rural to the core and country folk predominate, fitting for country-fair racing days. Indeed, on opening day, an elderly lady, watching horses cross the wire after one race and squinting into a dazzling sun, turned and asked, “Are they gonna’ come round again?” 🐾

