

Flocking



Nudder Budder, with Oscar Delgado aboard, streaks to a dominating victory at Hialeah Park. The 3-year-old Strawflyin Buds filly is owned and trained by Victor Gonzalez.

SOUTH

American Quarter Horse racing returns to Florida after an 18-year absence.

IT IS 1:05 P.M. ON A SUNNY AND BEAUTIFUL SOUTH FLORIDA afternoon on November 28. Eight American Quarter Horses approach the starting gate at Hialeah Park.

“Are you ready for racing?!” hollers announcer Peter Alleio.

The crowd of 26,846, the largest known crowd for an American Quarter Horse racing opening day ever and the largest recorded at a Florida racing event in many decades, answers with a roar of affirmation. The horses load into the gate, and the already crowded rail becomes downright claustrophobic as everyone presses up for a better view.

For a moment, everything is still.

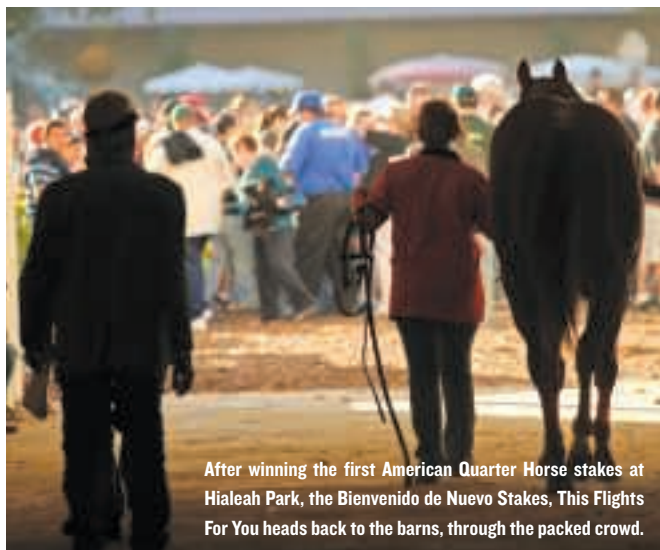
Story and photos by Andrea Caudill

The gates clang open, the crowd again lets out an enthusiastic cheer, and an octuplet of the fastest horses on earth charge for the finish line. In :16.058, Definatly Maybe’s nose hits the wire three-quarters of a length best, and jockey Jose Ranilla – riding his very first race – salutes the screaming grandstand with a yell and an enthusiastic fist pump.

American Quarter Horse racing has returned to Florida.

Florida Quarters

FLORIDA HAS HAD A LONG HISTORY OF PRODUCING GREAT RACING American Quarter Horses. From the state’s first registered



After winning the first American Quarter Horse stakes at Hialeah Park, the Bienvenido de Nuevo Stakes, This Flights For You heads back to the barns, through the packed crowd.

Quarter Horse, Kip, came a line of horses that culminated in champion and 1966 All American Futurity winner Go Dick Go, who went on to become a top sire.

The great champion Stella Moore was owned by a Palatka auto dealer who also bred and raced Stella Moore's foal Segura Miguel, who won the 1957 Southwestern Futurity at Ruidoso Downs, which was the forerunner of today's All American Futurity (G1). The Sunshine State also produced All American winners Ronas Ryon (himself a top sire), Special Elan and Merganser. Florida-bred The Signature sired champions Rare Form, Heza Fast Man, Sign Of Lanty, Meter Me Gone, The Casanova, Sig Hanson and Make Mine Bud.

Horsemen from the state such as Gerald Sutton, Dr. Lindsey Burbank, Ben Benham, Joe Leitner, Earl Crossman, Darrell Ennis, Raymon Tucker, John Shaw, Jack Booream, Gerald and Paulette Keesling, Dan Lucas, and Buddy and Patty Newsome have raised and raced many great runners.

Pari-mutuel wagering on the sport began in 1950 at Sunshine Park, drawing such luminary runners as Stella Moore, Barbra B, Miss Bank and Leota W. It continued, on and off, at Tampa Bay, Ponce de Leon Raceway at Bayard, Tropical and Pompano parks near Miami, Bo-Bett Racetrack near Reddick, Seminole Park Raceway at Casselberry, Nassau Downs at Callahan and Jacksonville-area tracks Florida Downs, Pecan Park, Gator Park and Suwanee River Downs.

Pompano Park, a harness track north of Fort Lauderdale, began racing Quarter Horses in 1972. The track closed its final Quarter Horse meet in 1991, the last time pari-mutual Quarter Horse racing was in Florida.



The winners of the eight races on opening day each received an etched glass bowl.

The Florida Quarter Horse Racing Association, headed by Steve Fisch, D.V.M., spent more than four years helping to craft the legislation to bring racing back to the state. The association brought in experts from other states, such as Debbie Shauf from the Oklahoma Quarter Horse Racing Association and Laverne Perry from the Louisiana Quarter Horse Breeders Association, to give advice. This summer, the group succeeded in passing favorable legislation, jump-starting racing.

Fisch, who with wife Kelley runs AVS Equine Medical & Surgical Hospital in Tallahassee, stands in the opening day's winner's circle, eyeing the grandstand, which echoes with voices and throbs with the heartbeat of thumping, high-bass Latino music. Hialeah management expected a crowd of only 10,000 to 12,000 people, and more than double that amount means everything is packed, with long lines for food and even longer lines for betting windows. The 10,000 souvenir T-shirts they have printed sell out within hours.

Families wander through the grounds, soaking up the atmosphere and listening to music. Kids jump on play equipment. A pony rider stops between races to let both kids and adults experience the softness of a horse's velvet muzzle for the first time.

It is the realization of a dream.

"It gives me goosebumps," Fisch says.



The crowd watches as horses leave the paddock and head to the track.

Hialeah History

HIALEAH PARK IS NORTHWEST OF MIAMI IN THE CITY OF HIALEAH. The blue-collar city is the fifth-largest in the state, with 215,000 residents. When the return of racing was announced, management within days was swamped with 9,000 applications for jobs. According to a City of Hialeah study, the track will directly and indirectly create 11,000 jobs.

The historic track opened in 1925, was damaged by a hurricane the following year and was purchased by Joseph Widener in 1930. Widener rebuilt the track, using architectural inspiration from the greatest European tracks, from the tree-lined paths to the elaborate staircases and lavish landscaping. It was during the years of the Great Depression that Hialeah acquired her famous flamingos that reside permanently in the infield, an Audubon Bird Sanctuary.

Hialeah was for decades one of the greatest Thoroughbred tracks in the world, becoming an icon of the state. The greatest Thoroughbreds contested the races there – Seabiscuit, Citation,

Jose Angel's Definatly Maybe won the very first American Quarter Horse race held at Hialeah Park. Afterward, he was surrounded by reporters.



Kelso, Seattle Slew, Spectacular Bid, John Henry. So too did the famous – Presidents Truman, Kennedy and Nixon, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, movie star Will Rogers, singers Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, and even royalty went to Hialeah to see and be seen. Famed pilot Amelia Earhart gave her farewell at Hialeah Park before she began her ill-fated 1937 flight around the world.

The track was also the backdrop for a number of movies, such as the award-winning 1978 movie “The Champ” and the 1989 Richard Dreyfuss comedy “Let it Ride,” and has a cameo in the opening credits of 1980s television series “Miami Vice.”

John Brunetti purchased the track in 1977. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places two years later, but by the 1980s, the track was struggling with lagging handle and attendance. In 1987, the Florida racing commission gave the track unfavorable racing dates, which was then followed by the deregulation of dates that forced it into competition with nearby Calder Race Course and Gulfstream Park. Hialeah spiraled toward its eventual closure in May 2001. The track, once known as the Queen of the South, fell silent.

The track acquired a Quarter Horse racing license last spring, and after announcing the meet, spent about \$20 million renovating the grounds, which had fallen into disrepair. Brunetti, his son John Jr., general manager Randy Soth, track man Dennis Testa, racing secretary Sam Abbey and FQHRA

After the fourth race, Hialeah's famous flamingos flew around the track.



horsemen's representative Duayne Diderickson all worked hard to get everything in shape by the November 28 deadline.

In June, Gov. Charlie Crist signed a bill expanding gaming run by the Seminole Tribe, and expanded gambling at tracks. The bill requires a track with a Quarter Horse permit – which includes Hialeah – to run minimum days, from 20 in 2010 to 40 in 2012, with a minimum of 50 percent Quarter Horse races, and requires them to have an agreement with FQHRA. It allows tracks to run a no-limit poker room, simulcasting and on-track wagering and, after two years of racing, would allow the track to apply for 2,000 Class III slot machines. As of press time, the Florida legislature had yet to ratify the bill.

“We think this is a good enough start that it will impress the legislature enough to finalize everything in the law that will allow us to develop full-time, year-round Quarter Horse racing with alternative gaming at every facility,” says Florida horsemen Dan Lucas. “That is our goal. Our other goal was to help Hialeah and Mr. Brunetti bring back Hialeah to its previous glory. He and his staff left no stone unturned, and money was no object in bringing that place up to opening day. Problems were almost nonexistent, and horsemen were completely

Fans were given hands-on time with horses. This girl and her dad were allowed to pet trainer Lori Harris' pony horse.



cooperative. Everyone stepped forward to try to make this thing work. It was an amazing effort by everyone.”

Florida's Future

WITH ADDITIONAL GAMING IN MIND, HIALEAH IS FULFILLING THIS two-year requirement for a poker room by running two 20-day back-to-back meets. The track runs Saturdays-Tuesdays and will close February 2. It features eight Quarter Horse races per day with average purses of \$100,000 per day. Hialeah has signed a three-year agreement with the FQHRA to host races there. The second meet will run in the winter of 2010-11 and the third in the winter of 2011-12.

Other Quarter Horse racing permits taken in the state include the tracks of Pompano and Gulfstream parks. There are also permits – but not yet tracks – in Gadsden, Jefferson, Hamilton, Ft. Meyers and Marion counties.

“The future is bright for Florida,” says Fisch. “Hialeah is just the first in what we hope will be a circuit in Florida. This is a big first step for us. We hope with this meet that we can prove to the Florida legislature that Quarter Horse racing is for real.

“We have a deal with Hialeah for two meets in the next few years. We hope by then, we’ll have five permits and some of those tracks up and running.”

Changing Lives

IT IS ONLY MINUTES AFTER DEFINITELY MAYBE HAS made history at Hialeah Park, but already lives have been changed. The black Panther Mountain gelding’s owner, Jose Angel of Marietta, Georgia, stands within a circle of television and news media, pressing his new glass trophy to his chest.

Meanwhile, the horse’s trainer, Manuel Mata, is celebrating much more than his first official win as a trainer. The Springfield, Missouri, resident got his start working in a restaurant and training horses in his backyard.

With the help of his cousin Angel, he began training more seriously – mostly Angel’s horses – and racing them in Oklahoma with another trainer. He was unable to get a trainers license due to his trouble reading English, which is his second language. The soft-spoken man overcame that barrier and received his hard-earned Florida license. He then returned to the state he used to live in with a string of 20 horses and, on opening weekend, he watched his trainees head out onto the track wearing their M/M blinkers and win four of the first nine races held at the track.

“It is something big for me,” he says. “We have been hoping to do well (at Hialeah) because Remington Park is a tough track, but we won a lot of races there.”

At the start of the meet, racing secretary Sam Abbey reported that of the 864 temporary stalls the track constructed for the first meet, there were 820 stalls allocated. Quarter Horsemen from not only Florida and Georgia but also New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, North Carolina and Michigan headed to southern Florida for the meet.

Seven-consecutive-time champion trainer Paul Jones brought a string of 26 horses to the Sunshine State, to be



Trainer Manuel Mata won three of four races his horses were entered in on opening day at Hialeah.

ramrodded by assistant Raymond Vargas, who worked as an assistant for Jack Brooks and has cared for Jones’ strings in Oklahoma and Texas.

Texas trainer Brad Bolen brought in 53 head for the meet. Most of his trainees are owned by Debra Gotovac, but he also runs horses for others, including Tom Maher’s Shamrock Ranch in South Dakota.

“We think it’s going to be the best opportunity for Quarter Horses nationwide,” Bolen says. “If they get slots down there and racing year round, it’s going to be a pretty neat deal.”

The track will run a total of 23 stakes, highlighted by the Hialeah Laddie and Lassie stakes and the South Florida Derby, all \$100,000-added events. There are 37 early nominations to the Hialeah Laddie and 36 to

the Hialeah Lassie Stakes. Nominations in the Laddie include Bolen’s trainee Swingin Daddy, the Agouti gelding owned by Gotovac who has already run out more than \$140,000 while racing in the Grade 1 Ruidoso, All American and Dash For Cash futurities, and setting a track record at Lone Star Park. The finals for both races were scheduled December 26.

“You could tell from the reaction of the fans that this race-track and the further development of it will be the true heart of the community,” Lucas says. “The fans were so excited and so happy to see the track to open. They were there for long after the last race, just enjoying the festivities and the racetrack.”

“We want Quarter Horse racing to have this new venue,” he continues. “We certainly hope in the future that more of the horsemen take advantage of it. I think the purses should increase significantly the last three weeks of the meet, so if you’re thinking about it, jump in the truck, bring your horses and run. There is a lot of opportunity down here.”

Andrea Caudill is the editor of The American Quarter Horse Racing Journal. To comment, write to acaudill@aqha.org. For more information on Hialeah Park, visit www.hialeahparkracing.com.

The grandstand was packed with nearly 27,000 people on opening day.

