

First Exhibition Races Were Held In October 1890

Harness Horse Racing Always Popular Sport

It was late in 1890 when crowds from the three Maritime Provinces gathered at Charlottetown for the first race on what was to become an internationally known track.

Since that October afternoon the improvements on the Exhibition Grounds and driving track have been maintained at a gradual pace. New programs and entertainments were introduced over the years and periodically new buildings were erected on the grounds.

In recent years there has been a steady building program underway. New stables and barns for horses, cattle and all classes of livestock were erected and only last year the directors erected another magnificent new building.

This has the combined function of being used as an exhibition building during the summer and a rink during the winter months. It is known as the Coliseum and will add a great deal to the already famous grounds.

The President of the Exhibition Association is Dr. J. P. Lantz, the manager and vice-president is H. J. Kennedy. Cmdr. G. H. Buntain is the secretary treasurer while the race secretary is Frank Acorn. Other directors are R. B. Bell, George A. Calbeck, Robert Chapell, G. Gordon Hughes, R. A. Borden, F. R. McLaine, Dr. H. H. Pierce, R. A. Proffit and Cecil J. Stewart.

But now to return to the year 1890 and review step by step the development of the Driving Park and Exhibition Association.

The history of the Charlottetown Driving Park and Provincial Exhibition Association dates from 1890 until the present. The developments range from the clearing away of a woodlot on the Kensington Road in 1888 to an ever expanding program of building and racing which has succeeded in giving Prince Edward Island one of the finest exhibition and driving parks in Canada.

In 1888 there was little along the Kensington Road where the Exhibition buildings now stand except a woodlot. But the founders of the Exhibition wisely knowing that there was a need for a combined exhibition and driving park hewed down the trees and within two years were able to stage their first racing meet.

It was not the first racing meet to be held in the Province. There were more than a dozen race tracks on the Island at the time with the track at Upton owned by Dr. Jack Jenkins being the closest to the City. The Hernando-Black Pilot race at Summerside in 1888 brought together one of the greatest gatherings of people ever assembled in the Province.

HELD IN DRILL HALL

The Queen's County Exhibition was held in those days in the Drill Hall, Charlottetown, and a bridge extended across Government Pond from the Drill Hall to the western bank of the pond where the cattle and other livestock exhibits were kept.

Far-sighted men in the community recognized the need for a combined race track and exhibition grounds. There was a lot of agitation and several meetings were held in 1888 and a bill was passed by the local Legislature, granting a charter to the Charlottetown Driving Park and Provincial Exhibition Association with a capital of \$25,000, the shares being \$100 each. They were nearly all taken up by business men and others in Charlottetown and by farmers and stock raisers in several parts of the Island.

KENSINGTON ROAD SITE

After considerable discussion, the present site on Kensington Road was decided on. It was largely covered with woods. The race track was laid off from plans received from the National Trotting Association, Hartford, Conn. The various buildings were put under construction, and it may be remarked that the Main Building, which was burned down some years ago, was built from plans used for a similar structure in one of the largest exhibition centres of Ontario.

The present grandstand was built as a double-decker. It took two years to complete the track and buildings, and the first combined exhibition and race meet was held in October, 1890. It was a great occasion, with people attending from all parts of the Province and also from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Visitors who had travelled much said it was the finest exhibition plant and race track they had ever seen, and that impression was no doubt a true one.

Government assistance was given towards the prize list for horse-cattle, sheep and poultry and rig requirements for breeds were laid down. From the first the exhibition prospered and the wise rule set up by directors were the means of developing breeds that have raised the standard and made this Island famous for its types of livestock. The Main Building housed the exhibits of vegetable and fruits and thousands of products of skilled handicraft workers and weavers who spent many long evenings fashioning them, hoping for a prize which was then a very treasured thing.

FIRST RACES

The first horse races held at that opening meet in 1890 were limited to three classes on each of two afternoons. Purses were from \$100 to \$200, yet there were several mainland entries and reading the reports we find that the public was quite enthused and the races considered a great success.

The early part of October was considered by the directors the most desirable time to hold the show, as the fruits and vegetables would be at their best. Later it was changed to the last week of September.

Old Times tell us that Exhibitions days were usually cold, and all the stores advertised bargain sales of fur coats, warm underwear and such seasonable requirements. All merchants got ready and all hotels for those gala days and incoming trains were packed with people to see the show. Trains were usually held till 7 o'clock in the evening and it was one of the sights for the youths of those days to see the incoming and outgoing "specials."

CELEBRATED SIRE

The building of the new race track caused a greater development of interest in harness horse racing and was the cause of the late W. A. Brennan of Summerside sending to the celebrated Palo Alto Farm, California, for two standard bred stallions, Parkside and Ballston. The former became one of the great Island sires, sharing honors with others like Dean Swift, Administrator, All Right, Hernando and Brazilian.

Breeders became aware that to produce trotters and pacers to compete with those of the other Provinces and the United States they must have blood of the best strains. True, there had been other good foundation stock, but it did not apparently have the speed or it did not pass on to its progeny the necessary flash to carry them to the wire in the lead as records commenced to drop well below the three-minute mark.

At the opening meet and for two or three years afterwards the high-wheel sulky was in vogue and some drivers went to put the butt of the whip inside the revolving spokes and create a noise that would accelerate their steeds. There was a lot of scoring and manoeuvring and it usually took ten or twelve scores before the word "go" was given. The most noted starter was Dr. J. H. Reed, brought here from Guelph, Ontario, and his booming voice could be heard quite as clearly as our present sound system.

The upper deck of the old grandstand was a favorite place for young men and their sweethearts as it afforded more privacy. Due to certain amount of swaying, the directors feared it might be an element of danger and in the early 1900's the grandstand was cut down to its present size.

GREATEST ERA

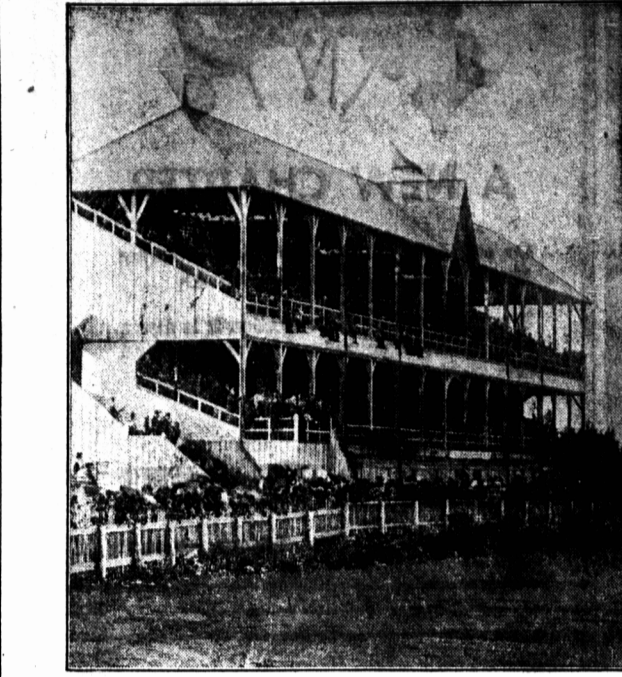
Harness racing was in the greatest era in the years 1892-1905. Tracks were in operation all over the Maritimes and the Halifax Exhibition races extended to seven or more afternoons. Shipping costs were very low and that made it easy for horsemen to move around from one meet to another.

In those days time made by a horse in a race was not only his record but his classification and if he won in 2:30 he was only eligible to the 2:30 class. Dodging of time, particularly on the smaller tracks, was much resorted to and it was usual for horses starting out in the game to be labelled with 2:59 at country tracks, which made them eligible to the three-minute class. Timers had to stick to time actually made at larger tracks, such as Charlottetown, Moncton, Halifax, Saint John, New Glasgow, Fredericton, Sydney, etc.

The records were much improved by the introduction of the bike sulky in the middle 1890's. Most of the bikes were made by attaching bicycle wheels to the former high-wheel sulkies, but soon manufacturers were turning out a special and much faster type.

TURF RECORDS

Glancing over the turf records, for the year 1897, we find that the record for trotting mares was made at Charlottetown, Sept. 23 of that year by Minora, owned by J. R. Lamy, Amherst—2:19½. The record for Maritime trotters was also made at Charlottetown Sept. 23, by Montrose, owned by Reddin Bros., Charlottetown—2:20½.



Horses Parading Before Judges' Stand
And Old Double Decker - Yesteryear

town—2:20½. The fastest seventh heat ever made by a trotter on a Maritime track up to Sept. 23, 1897, was Warren Guy's at Charlottetown—2:19½. And the fastest horse owned and bred in the Maritime Provinces in 1897 was Special Blend, owned by E. LeRoi Willis, Saint John, N. B.—time 2:18½. Special Blend was sired by Black Pilot, 2:20½, owned by Dockendorff Bros., North River, P. E. I.

FAST HEATS

Track trotting records for the Maritimes came down slowly between the years 1897 and 1918 and it was not until Oct. 1, 1920 that it took a big cut. That happened in the free-for-all trot at Charlottetown Exhibition when Bill Sharen, driven by Peter Carroll, stepped his third heat in 2:11½, which, among other great performances that season, led to his being sold to the American trainer, Tommy Murphy, for \$25,000 in United States funds the largest amount ever paid for a Canadian trotter or pacer.

That record stood until Aug. 10, 1931, when it was lowered to 2:10½ by Abbe Worthy, 2:09½ (Hood). It was equalled on Aug. 16, 1936, by a little mare from Newfoundland, Harvest Melody (MacKinnon), that won the second heat of the 2:18 trot in that time. Two afternoons later Silk Girl 2:08½ won the first heat of the 2:15 trot from Harvest Melody in 2:09½ and set up a new track record. Silk Girl lost the next two heats and race to Harvest Melody.

A short time later—Labor Day Sept. 6, 1936—it was lowered to 2:08½ by Heatherbell (MacKinnon) and later on to 2:07½ by Alloway (Ryan). That time was also equalled by Watchin' (Hood) and Lee Brewer (Moreside) and finally set at 2:07½ by Watchin' (Hood) on Aug. 18, 1945.

PACING RECORDS

The pacing record was also a long time in coming down from the 2:17½ mark by Ada Mae (L. Steele) in the 1890's to 2:12½ by Fern Hall (Cameron) at the Provincial Exhibition, Charlottetown, Sept. 29, 1920. Three years later John Willard, sitting behind the great free-for-all John R. Braden set the record at 2:08½ and it was not until Aug. 19, 1931 that Eula H. driven by Billy Keyes, reduced it to 2:08.

It stood there until 1932 when in the hectic free-for-all that is still remembered by harness horse fans, Neil Frisco (Hood) won the first heat in 2:07½. He was a very erratic horse and was distanced the second heat. Marjorie M. (Jabaise) winning in 2:07½ and being the record. She also won the race. On August 24, 1933, Calumet

Brownie (Hood) won the first heat in the free-for-all in 2:07½, sharing honors with Neil Frisco, Marjorie M., Darkey Gratton (Conroy) winning the race in 2:08, 2:08½. In a free-for-all that will long be remembered, Aug. 24, 1934, Toll Gate (Sweeney) was a straight heat winner. Guy the Tramp (Crummer) 2-2-2. Four other starters. Time 2:06½, 2:05½, 2:06½, all thru heats bettering the previous track record.

At the great Provincial Exhibition in 1936, when a new average time for heats trotted and heats paced was set up, the free-for-all was also a stand-out. Its five entries were the best pacers that time in Canada and even heat was a terrific battle with Wenger (E. Avery) winning the tric from Calumet Budlong, Deamat, Marjorie M. and Toll Gate. Time 2:05¼, 2:05½, 2:06½. The 2:05¼ is the present track record.

Just after the depression of 1932 business began to pick up and the directors of the Exhibition gaining confidence, enlarged their program of entertainment year by year bringing in new and better acts and specialties. Evening shows were put on with the assistance of the Charlottetown Driving Club, whose members, properly attired and with perfectly turned-out mounts, performed in a brilliantly lighted ring in the centre field. This lighting arrangement was designed by specialists from New York and readers who think back will agree with us that it was a very fine show.

As the night shows continued to draw larger and larger audiences, greater efforts were made to bring in acts of continental fame and it can be truly said that every worthwhile act shown in the larger centres of the United States or Canada with the exception of

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