
Turf Races Are The Spice Of Life At Suffolk Downs

And they're off! the track announcer broadcasts to the crowd as ten high-strung thoroughbreds lunge out of their gates onto the emerald green turf oval at Suffolk Downs in East Boston, MA. With those words and the ring of the starting gate, the betting windows close and thousands of spectators begin to shout encouragement to the horses they bet on moments before.

Turf races are a favorite of the fans at Suffolk Downs. Grass provides an extra factor for bettors to contemplate, as well as a brief taste of racing as practiced in England, France and Australia. There's something classy about jockeys racing eight 1,200-pound horses over the tall grass as they battle for the lead. For a few seconds during the less than two-minute race, fans forget the statistics the racing form, their superstitions and their luck to enjoy the beauty of the sport.

The turf races are a pleasant change of pace because only one out of every 15 races is run on the turf course. Three days each week, between Memorial Day and November, the racing secretary at Suffolk Downs writes two turf races on the card (racing schedule). All other races are run on the mile-and-a-quarter-long dirt course.

The popularity of turf races has grown

steadily since 1958 when Suffolk Downs built a seven furlong turf oval inside its dirt course. At first none of the owners wanted to race their horses on the turf. American thoroughbreds have traditionally raced on dirt tracks while their British and European counterparts race on turf.

In the early '60s, American horsemen started to discover that buying foreign horses was an economical way to build up their breeding and racing programs in "the States." To increase the value of these imported thoroughbreds, as well as the stud fees for the stallions, they needed to race them on U.S. tracks. Since these horses had raced on turf in their homelands, they performed better on turf than on the dirt. The demand for turf tracks started to increase.

"Today turf tracks are popular with fans, horsemen and track owners," says Christopher Scherf, director of services for the Thoroughbred Racing Association of America in Lake Success, NY. "You wouldn't build a track today without one."

More fans bet on turf races than dirt races. "Variety is the spice of life for fans," says Scherf. "With nine races on the card, seven on the dirt and two on the turf, fans might skip betting on some of the races on the dirt course, but they make a point to bet on both turf races." As a result, the tracks



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often get their best handle (amount wagered) on turf races. The larger the handle, the more money the track makes.

Horsemen like tracks with both dirt and turf courses because it gives them another option. Some horses run better on turf than on dirt. "The turf is also easier on the horses because it has more give than the dirt," explains Scherf. "In the past few years, turf races often have a fuller and more competitive field (group of horses in a race) than those on dirt courses. There is a definite growth in the popularity of turf races."

But, don't expect to see the 100 major race tracks in the U.S. and Canada convert their dirt courses to turf. "In England, race meetings are generally less than a week long," says Scherf. The turf has three months to recover before the next meet. In this country, race meetings last for months. Some tracks, like Suffolk Downs, have both a winter and summer meet for year-round racing. "There is no way turf can stand up to that kind of punishment."

At Suffolk Downs, the dirt and turf courses have been managed by one family since 1935. Steve Pini, general foreman, is the third generation of his family responsible for providing a safe racing surface at the famous New England track.

Nicholas Pini, Steve's grandfather, was a construction foreman in 1935 for Joe Tomasello when his company turned 208



Rocks and debris are periodically removed from the dirt course with a rockpicker.



at Suffolk Downs.

acres of mud flats next to the Atlantic Ocean into Suffolk Downs in just 60 days. Massachusetts legalized pari-mutuel betting that year. To take quick advantage of the opportunity, the officers of the Eastern Racing Association hastily selected the East Boston site and hired Tomasello to build the track as rapidly as possible.

Pini was one of 3,000 men hired by Tomasello that winter to build the race track. Together with 36 bulldozers, 24 power shovels and more than 600 trucks, the men completed the racing strip, the first concrete grandstand in the country, stables, clubhouse, judges stand, administration building, roads and landscaping. Tomasello met the deadline at a cost of \$2 million.

The ten-furlong (a furlong is one eighth of a mile) dirt track was built with 125,000 cubic yards of loam transported from Lexington, MA. The late William Almy Jr. and Francis Kelley supervised the construction of the dirt track which horsemen rated as one of the fastest in the country after it opened in April. Nicolas Pini assumed responsibility for its maintenance.

"It was more like a fairground than a race track back then," says Steve Pini. "The total season, or meet, was from the beginning of April to the Fourth of July." The rest of the year Suffolk Downs was rented out for boat shows, car shows and all kinds of outdoor events. At the end of the meet, all

but a skeleton crew was laid off until the following spring.

After the Korean War, Nick's son Charles joined the crew at Suffolk Downs as a laborer and equipment operator. Out of all 200 acres of grounds, stables for 1,350 horses, and the grandstands, it was the track that interested him most. He took special pride in the condition of the course. He'd arrive at the track each morning at five to get the dirt course ready for warm-ups at 6 a.m. Much of the equipment used to loosen and groom the dirt was built by him. He insisted that the crew get the machinery onto the course immediately after each race. At the first sign of dust, he'd order the water trucks onto the course to wet down the dirt before the next race. Precision was required to get the job done in less than 15 minutes. Pini would time the crew and, if one of the crew wasn't taking his job seriously, he'd find himself cleaning stables the next day.

When Charles took over the general foreman's job from his father in the late '50s, he approached the racing association board about installing a turf course inside the dirt oval. The track still had a single, 60-day meet. On a modest budget and without much consideration to drainage, Pini hauled in more truck loads of loam for the 65-foot-wide oval, sowed common Kentucky bluegrass and installed 75 quick-coupler sprinklers below the inside rail. Once es-

tablished, the bluegrass was mowed at six inches to provide a soft cushion for the horses and the jockeys. The turf course would remain exactly as built for the next 27 years.

In the late 60s, new owners wanted to extend the racing season as long as possible. It decided to add a winter meet. Not only would it produce more revenue for the track, it would enable horsemen to generate more income to counteract their escalating costs. More and more horsemen were depending upon "syndicates" (groups of investors) to pay their bills.

For nearly 20 more years, Charles Pini did his best and used every trick in the book to keep the dirt course open during the wet, cold Massachusetts winter. Without major renovation of the track, he was able to keep the horses running. The number of race days per year climbed from 60 to 200.

During this period, he hired his son Steve to help him maintain the track during his high school summer vacations. The union crew had grown in size from less than 20 to nearly 60 as Suffolk Downs became a year-round facility. More and more of his time was spent managing people. He wanted to improve the drainage on both the dirt and turf courses. Unfortunately, during the next 15 years when he and his son worked together at Suffolk Downs, the opportunity never came along.

When Charles Pini died unexpectedly two years ago and Steve was asked to take his place, his first thought was of the drainage work his father had never been able to complete. Horses will race on a sloppy track if they have to, but owners don't like the extra risk involved. An injured horse can't win purses. It boils down to the fact that owners decide where their horses race, especially if they are good. The better the horses are that race at a track, the bigger the crowds will be. A track has to attract good horses, winning jockeys and fans to be successful.

Edward (Buddy) LeRoux, Jr., who until recently was part owner of the Boston Red Sox, led a group of investors in the purchase of Suffolk Downs in 1986. LeRoux has played a major role in Boston sports, having served as trainer for both the National Hockey League Boston Bruins and the National Basketball Association Boston Celtics. His most amazing feat was rising from trainer of the American League Boston Red Sox to part owner in nine years. He believed the success of the Bruins, Celtics and Red Sox could be repeated for the sport of horse racing. With LeRoux's urging, his partners in Belle Isle Limited Partnership immediately explored ways to improve the track facility.

Pini saw the chance to improve both courses and was thrilled to become involved in a track improvement program. Steve had always sought advice from the track engineer and superintendents from tracks he respected. That winter Pini had the top four inches (more than 6,000 cubic yards) of track mix scraped off and stored. Then he had

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the scrapers remove another 14 inches of dirt and clay that lay below the track.

Fourteen inches of limestone dust was then trucked in and spread as the new base for the dirt course. Instead of acting as a barrier to drainage like clay, the stone dust allows excess moisture to pass through. At the same time, it holds on to a portion of the water to act as a reservoir for the soil above during dry conditions.

Instead of putting the original track mix back on top of the stone dust, Pini brought in four inches of mason's sand. His plan was to keep the track dry during the winter and spring with the sand. The following May, when the rain tapered off and temperatures started to rise, he'd remove the sand and replace it with the dirt he had stored the previous fall. It was a tremendous task, but

above the stone dust is pushed into windrows. A Harley rock picker lifts up the windrows of soil and removes any object larger than one-half inch. "Trainers will tell you if rocks are starting to show up," says Pini. "Of course, I hope the equipment operators see the rocks before the trainers do. It's their job to make sure that track is safe."

When the crew isn't loosening or cleaning the mixture of sand, silt and clay, they are wetting it down to firm it up. From 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. during the summer, Pini's crew uses 3,000-gallon tank trucks with boom sprayers to wet down the dirt course. Three percent of the dirt is clay to hold on to this moisture during the day. "It's not as simple as wetting down a baseball infield," explains Pini. "You really have to get it just right. Horses are very sensitive about their feet and the traction they get off the dirt."

Horses have to work harder on a soft or

the soil needed to dry out after rains. It would take a week for the turf to be dry enough for racing after heavy storms. Even then, there would be wet spots long after the rest of the turf was dry. Pini thought he could double the number of races on the turf oval if he could get better control over moisture.

He'd heard about wetting agents from a friend that worked for Rochester Midland. The localized wet spots made him think that something in the thatch or soil was preventing the water from draining. He mixed 40 gallons of Penetrate wetting agent in the 2,500-gallon tank of a water truck and sprayed the entire turf course. "We noticed right away that the turf course was taking irrigation water more quickly than before," states Pini. "The wet spots also disappeared. That summer we were able to race on the turf course the day after a hard rain, instead of a week later. Our number of turf races increased from 50 to more than 100 during the summer meet."

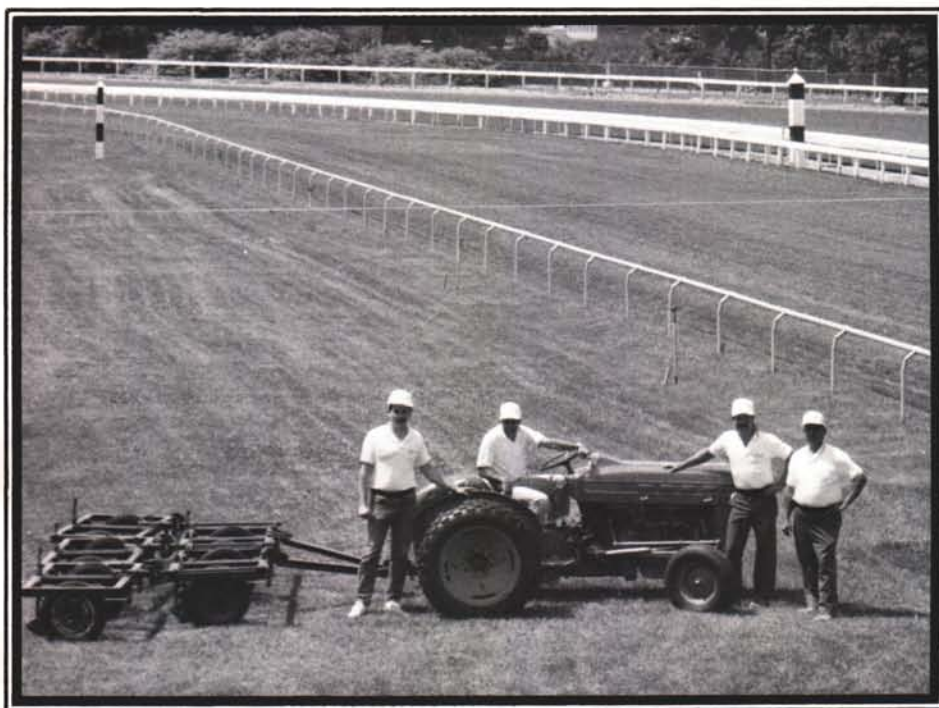
That spring when Pini aerated the oval he noticed the tines penetrated deeper than before. "We were finally starting to make a dent in the turf after nearly 30 years of racing," he remarked. It gave Pini hope that he would not have to rebuild the soil beneath the oval.

More than two inches of thatch had built up at the base of the bluegrass. Pini wanted a shorter turf, one he could repair quickly. He called the Lofts Seed office in Arlington, MA, to get some advice on seeding. General Manager Jerry Zuccala happened to answer the call. Normally, Zuccala would have passed the call on to one of his salesmen. "I guess the thought of working with Suffolk Downs captured my interest," he remarks.

Pini invited Zuccala out to the track. "Steve already knew about turf-type perennial ryegrasses," says Zuccala. "He planned to scalp the bluegrass, remove the thatch, aerify heavily and overseed with ryegrass. This was February and he had to have the course back in shape by May. I suggested he use a blend of ryegrasses instead of just one type and institute a schedule of fertilization and weed control."

Zuccala provided Pini with a maintenance schedule for the seven-acre plus turf oval starting April 1 and ending in the second week of November. To help the turf recover from the frequently severe Boston winters, Pini's crew applies Lofts Professional Lawn Food (25-5-10) at the rate of one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. A third of the nitrogen in this fertilizer is slow-release, sulfur-coated urea. It also contains needed phosphorus, potassium and iron to help the turf recover from any winter damage.

In mid-May, in addition to an application of wetting agent, Pini controls young broad-leaf weeds with 26-3-3 Professional Weed and Feed containing Trimec. It takes 20, 54-pound bags to cover the entire turf course. "Since we mow the course fairly high (3-4 inches) and keep it thick," says Pini, "we don't have too many severe weed problems."



Third generation track foreman Steve Pini and his hand-picked crew (left to right) Anthony DeFelice, Mike DeSimone and John Coppola.

it enabled the track to increase its number of race days from 200 to 265 per year.

"We can make the change in two days," says Steve. "After the last race on Monday night, we bring in three front-end loaders, a dozen dump trucks, three graders and three spreader boxes. We don't race on Tuesdays or Thursdays. By 6 a.m. on Wednesday, most of the track is back in for warm-ups. By 1 p.m., the entire track is ready for the first race."

Nobody fusses over dirt like the field crew at a horse race track. They are constantly mixing, screening, dragging, rolling, and brushing the dirt. Before every race they loosen the surface with a harrow before dragging it smooth. Suffolk Downs uses four different harrows depending upon how deep Pini wants the soil worked.

Rocks that work their way to the surface are removed with a rock picker. The dirt

"cuppy" track. They may become exhausted by the time they reach the stretch. A hard surface puts all the shock and strain of racing on the horse's feet. There's no forgiveness in case of a slip or fall. The dirt has to give just enough for the horse's hooves to get a grip without slipping. "Getting the dirt in condition before the races start is one thing," says Pini. "Keeping it that way for all races is something else."

Having solved the drainage situation on the dirt course, Pini turned his attention to the turf oval. The Kentucky bluegrass was so tall it couldn't be rolled effectively to repair divots. Turf tracks are rolled in the opposite direction of the traffic after each race to smooth out ridges and push down divots. Even the pull-behind aerator could hardly reach the soil through the thick blanket of foliage.

The tall turf also blocked out light and air

A half-rate of fertilizer is applied in mid-June and again in mid-July to help the turf recover from the six to eight races held on it each week during the summer meet. As temperatures begin to fall in September a full rate of the fertilizer is made for the same reason.

Overseeding divots takes place regularly throughout the summer, but in late September the entire course is overseeded with a blend of three perennial ryegrasses called Triplex. First Pini aerates the course. He can't lower the height of cut, so he irrigates after spreading 250 pounds of seed per acre. By November, the young ryegrass has filled in badly worn areas near the turns and along the rail when Pini makes one final full-rate application of fertilizer. In October he makes a second application of wetting agent to prepare the soil for the heavy winter snow and rain.

"We seem to have eliminated the thatch problem for good," says Pini. "Controlling the moisture and compaction has certainly helped. By getting rid of the wet spots and seeding worn areas with the fast-germinating ryegrass, we end up with better turf overall." He also credits cutting the turf with a pull-behind seven-gang reel mower three times a week at about four inches for keeping clippings under control.

The difference in the turf oval at Suffolk Downs is so noticeable, the Boston Globe did a story based on interviews with the horse trainers on how improved the track is. "It's a credit to Steve that he sought advice and made the turf course a priority when he has so many other areas to worry about," Zuccala remarks.

In addition to the turf surface, Pini has increased the amount of landscaping in the infield. The turf course is surrounded by a neatly-trimmed hedge to emulate British tracks. A large horseshoe-shaped bed has been planted with thousands of marigolds and geraniums. In the center of the bed are the initials S.D. in privet hedge.

"Now that the turf course is getting the recognition it deserves, things are going to happen a lot faster."

The track was not the only area he was improving at the time. He also renovated the clubhouse landscape, updated the irrigation for this area, and added numerous hanging baskets and plant beds near the grandstands. All the trees around the track have been mulched with bark.

"I'm fortunate to be able to do many of the things my grandfather and father wanted to do," says Steve. "Extending the season has been good for the track and the sport. It was tough at first, but we have learned ways to keep the course in condition during the winter and to provide trainers with safe and reliable dirt and turf courses."

Pini hand-picked Anthony DeFelice, John Coppola and Mike DeSimone out of 60 track workers to maintain the turf course. "My father help build it and it's where I started," explains Pini. "Tony and John share my feelings toward the course. Thirty years ago, my father believed that turf racing would be big one day in this country. If you think about it, that's not very long ago. We've had to learn alot in a short period of time while taking care of everything else at the track. Now that the turf course is getting the recognition it deserves, things are going to happen alot faster."

Pini's work is not complete by any means. An architectural firm has been retained to design the renovation of the entire track facility. Belle Isle also has plans for an arena-convention center, major hotel and indoor parking garage for the 50-year-old facility. "The planned additions should enhance the racing operation," says Al Curran, president of Suffolk Downs. "It should all add up to an improved racing facility and operation—one that fans will take pride in along with us. We want to please not only our longtime racing faithful, but also attract new fans so that Suffolk Downs will be bigger and better than ever." ☞

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