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NORTHLANDS

HEADING NORTH

The industry continues to grow in Alberta.

By Denis Blake

ASK ANY AMERICAN TO RATTLE OFF A FEW THINGS ABOUT THEIR neighbors to the north and you might hear the typical responses – “they play a lot of hockey,” “the people are so nice up there,” or “it sure gets cold in the winter.”

There certainly is some truth to those statements. North of the border, hockey is closer to a religion than a sport – Canada’s gold medal victory over the United States in the Olympics resulted in what the prime minister (no, not president) described as “a nationwide party of celebration.” It is often said that Canadians are more polite than Americans – there are traffic signs around Edmonton that actually use the word “please,” so perhaps that one is true as well. And it does get *very* cold in the Great White North – sometimes the high temperature in the winter is a negative number.

But the province of Alberta isn’t that much different than some of the western United States, and there are even some similarities to Quarter Horse racing’s hotbed in Texas. Oil and gas are big business in Alberta, as are the cattle and beef industries. Occasionally, you’ll even see a cowboy hat perched atop the head of an Albertan.

Of course, some things are different – “plug-ins” for one thing. Not the kind in your living room that you plug your television into. No, in Canada plug-ins are for cars and trucks to keep engines warm and able to start when the temperature drops well below zero (both Celsius and Fahrenheit).

The road signs all are in kilometers, but the Quarter Horses run races in yards (not meters) and lately they have been running faster, for more money and at bigger racetracks. With total Quarter Horse purses and handle in North America increasing every year since 1996, most regions have shown some growth over that period. Alberta is no exception, and in fact, might be one of the sport’s fastest-growing regions.

Edmonton’s Northlands Park, the premier track in the province of Alberta, has played host to Quarter Horse racing for the past two seasons.



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Numbers Show Growth

BACK IN 1996, THE PROVINCE OF ALBERTA HAD 81 QUARTER Horse races with purses of \$184,015 and handle of \$127,955. That ranked Alberta behind Ontario as the top Quarter Horse racing province and just ahead of British Columbia in most statistics. Last year, the Alberta numbers told a different story – 136 races, a 68-percent increase over 1996; purses of \$621,458, a 337-percent increase; and handle of \$284,091, a jump of 222 percent. This year's numbers, with a handful of race dates still remaining, have already eclipsed those figures and the province should end the year with modest gains in all three categories. In '96, the minimum purse at Whoop-Up Downs in Lethbridge was \$800. Increasing every year since then, the bottom purse was \$3,000 at the end of this season. Evergreen Park in Grande Prairie has posted a similar increase.

Though nowhere near on par with the major states south of the border, Alberta's numbers are in the same ballpark with states like Minnesota, Montana, Oregon and Wyoming. And there can be no disputing that Alberta is tops in Canada – last year the province had 42 percent of Canada's races, 58 percent of the purses and 45 percent of the handle, with Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan rounding out the list. Of the 10 Canadian champions crowned since the award was inaugurated in 1992, seven have been Alberta-breds.

The reason for the rise to prominence? "Slot machines," according to Allen Hadley, the program coordinator and only full-time employee of the Alberta Quarter Horse

Racing Association. Since the province's tracks added slot machines and video gaming, purses have surged, along with interest and participation in racing.

"The purses got bigger and we are drawing in a lot of people that got out of the business in the early '90s," Hadley says. "Those people are starting to return, along with other new owners and trainers simply because purses are so good."

The A List

ALTHOUGH IT DIDN'T HAVE A huge impact on the overall numbers, getting a chance to run at Northlands Park in Edmonton has many people excited. Located in a city of nearly one million and just off Wayne Gretzky Drive – hockey is king in Canada – Northlands is one of Alberta's two A – or top-tier – tracks, along with Stampede Park in Calgary. Last year sprinters debuted at Northlands with a six-pack of races, and they returned again this year for six more.

"I think that's our future," says owner Darren Pollitt, who has been importing some well-bred sprinters into Canada (see sidebar). "We've got to have the B tracks for everyone



Allen Hadley, program coordinator for the Alberta Quarter Horse Racing Association, sees opportunities for the sport growing in the region.

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Kay Haus' Wicked Pleasure, with Scott Sterr in the irons for trainer William Leech, rolled to victory in the \$20,500 Prairie Gold Futurity at Northlands Park in Edmonton, Alberta.

to get a chance to run, but if you don't have a track to run for the bigger purses there's no chance of the sport growing. Purses are what get people interested."

The two main B tracks – Evergreen Park and Whoop-Up Downs – are separated by some 600 miles of road. Operated by the Rocky Mountain Turf Club, Whoop-Up Downs is located about 50 miles from the Canada-Montana border and Evergreen Park sits in the northwest portion of the province. Millarville, where races have been held for 97 years, offers one day of racing every July 1, a national holiday called Canada Day (similar to Independence Day in the United States).

The consensus is that the B tracks are a valuable piece of the racing puzzle in Alberta, but racing on the A circuit is the key to future growth.

"Getting into Edmonton has helped," says Hadley. "As a result of getting into an A track, the simulcast signal is sent all over Canada – from Woodbine in Toronto to Hastings Park in Vancouver. The exposure of the big city has helped, too."

"Northlands has been very happy with the handle and the number of people that stayed until the end of the card for the Quarter Horse races," Hadley continues. "One of their hopes and our goals is to increase the size of the fields, which will help the handle even more."

Discussions are underway that could lead to Quarter Horses running at Calgary's Stampede Park. However, that track has no chute to allow for straightaway sprints,

so a 770-yard race is being planned for next year. And with a new track proposed for that city to replace Stampede Park, AQHRA is trying to get a foothold there so that Quarter Horse racing will be offered if a new track is built.

"We've already had preliminary meetings (with the Calgary Racing Entertainment Group), and they expressed an interest in Quarter Horse racing," says Hadley, who adds that construction plans for the proposed track call for a chute to allow for sprint racing.

As one would expect, with bigger purses come faster, better-bred horses. Earlier this year, Barely Shaken, a Royal Shake Em gelding, smashed Whoop-Up Downs' 300-yard track record by 24/100ths in the Alberta Bred Futurity (R), a race which has seen its purse grow from \$10,000 in 1999 to \$28,405 this year. And Heza Hot Hit lowered by 16/100ths the 400-yard track record at Evergreen Park while winning the Bayer Legend Canada Challenge (G3).

Alberta's influence stretches all the way to Ruidoso Downs – Wild On Corona, a colt out of the Alberta-bred mare and Canadian champion Packin The Fire, won an All American Futurity (G1) trial. And Tiny Rocket Dash, an Oregon-bred gelding by the Alberta stallion Terribly Wicked, won seven consecutive races in the Northwest before invading Los Alamitos, where he placed in a stakes and qualified to the Golden State Derby (G1).

NEW OWNER BRINGS IN NEW BLOOD

Top sires like Corona Cartel and Chicks Beduino pepper the program pages at Los Alamitos, Lone Star Park at Grand Prairie and other major tracks, but they can be hard to find in the smaller regions of the Quarter Horse racing world.

Even pedigree aficionados might have trouble recognizing the names of the popular sires in Alberta, so the locals took notice when a relatively new owner started importing horses with regal pedigrees. While these are not the six-figure yearlings that make headlines at the major sales, construction company owner Darren Pollitt has been laying out some serious money to build his racing program, Shady Lane Stables.

"We thought we needed to get some new blood into Alberta," says Pollitt, who has been involved with horses his whole life but has only been racing for about five years. "So we went to Utah and picked up a couple horses there and had good luck with them. And then we started going to Texas."

At this year's TQHA Yearling Sale, Pollitt purchased a pair of mid-priced Streakin La Jolla fillies to go along with distaffers by Chicks Beduino and Corona Cartel that he bought last year. Pollitt plans to breed them by embryo transfer while they are racing and then add them to his broodmare band when they come off the track. This year he bred mares to All American Futurity (G1) winner Ausual Suspect and world champion Special Leader, and he plans to try other top sires next year.

Like many other owners, Pollitt has turned his new activity into a family affair. His wife, Marilyn, and sons Stockton and Deston are all involved.

"I didn't think my wife would like it at first," he says. "But it's a family deal now with our sons, too. All we look forward to in the summer is racing horses. We haul our own and everyone helps out."

Pollitt breaks and starts his horses on his ranch between Edmonton and Calgary, and then turns them over to trainer Stan Webb. They have already had some success – First Bidder, a Utah-bred son of Dash Ta Fame, finished second in the 2000 Canadian Cup Futurity (RG3), the richest sprint race in the country. Sheza Special Chick, a 3-year-old Chicks Beduino filly, took this year's Ford Canada Challenge at Evergreen Park and earned a berth to the MBNA America Challenge Championships at Lone Star Park.

"We were going to Lone Star anyway," says Pollitt. "Last year at the (racing scholarship) auction they said the Canadians were cheap, so we bought the box seats at Lone Star and now our horse is going to be there, so it will be even better."

Pollitt is on the board of directors of the Alberta Quarter Horse Racing Association and by using his business connections he has helped bring new sponsors into racing. Like anyone else, Pollitt enjoys winning, but he also enjoys getting his family involved and establishing new friendships.

"Going to these sales we've met a lot of people, like the guys from B and B Joint Ventures," says Pollitt, referring to the Texas-based partnership of Bubba Smith and Bill Fowler that campaigns champion Shining Sky. "I think we'll stretch from Alberta to Texas knowing everyone on a good basis."



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Construction company owner Darren Pollitt has made several trips to the United States and returned home with horses sired by Chicks Beduino, Corona Cartel and Streakin La Jolla to race and breed in Alberta.