

YONKERS RACEWAY

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CORPORATE BROCHURE





Back on track

A \$285 million investment at Yonkers Raceway has equipped the venue for the 21st century. Ben Sansom reports on an expansion program which has enabled the historic venue to thrive where many others have suffered in the recent economic slowdown

Nothing quite matches the sight, the smell and the sound of a harness racing event. There is the dust and the drumming of the hooves, but more importantly there's the skill of the drivers, guiding their animals over the course of the race, constantly jockeying for position on the track and then finally the sheer thrill of the race to the finish.

One of North America's top harness racing venues is the one-half-mile Yonkers Raceway. Considered to be a distinctive New York City landmark, the raceway is conveniently located on 97 acres at the intersection of Central Park Avenue and Yonkers Avenue, easily accessible from exit 2 off the New York State Thruway (I-87). With a population of some 20 million people living within a 50 mile radius of the raceway, it is well placed to attract the crowds.

Over the years, Yonkers has developed an enviable reputation for standard bred racing. Its history dates back to 1899 when it began life as the Empire City Trotting Club—but it has been through a number of changes during its long lifetime. Between 1907 and 1942 it was used as a thoroughbred race course, and among the notable thoroughbreds to grace its track is Seabiscuit, who won the Scarsdale Handicap there in 1936.

Today, the raceway is in the capable hands of the Rooney family of Pittsburgh, who made the acquisition in 1972 and secured the future of harness racing for New York. Always fond of racing and a significant sportsman in his own right, family head Art Rooney had already achieved legendary status for his role as the founder of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Even that, however, had a horseracing flavour. The story goes that when Rooney purchased the NFL franchise in 1933 for the Pittsburgh Pirates (as they were then called), he did so with money gained from a winning bet on the horses.

Yonkers is a thriving race course, and it's one of the few in the United States that operates all the year round. It has a busy schedule, playing host to world class racing five nights out of every seven. A wide variety of races are staged here throughout the year, but the raceway is home to three major national harness events; the Art Rooney Pace for three year olds which was inaugurated in 1989, one year after Rooney's death; the Yonkers Trot, and Messenger Stakes. The Yonkers Trot is part of the Trotting Triple Crown while Messenger Stakes is part of the Pacing Triple Crown, making Yonkers the only track to host legs of both Triple Crowns. The track then went on to secure its place in racing history on November 25, 2006, by becoming the first track to host both Triple Crown races on the same day.

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them being Yonkers. And the Rooney family saw this as a great opportunity to achieve a significant turnaround in fortunes at the raceway.

The family initiated a program of renovation and expansion, investing some \$285 million in the future of the property and ensuring that it would be optimised for success in the 21st century—a move that has seen the raceway come through the recent economic downturn with relative comfort.

With the design handled by architect EwingCole, and Tishman acting as general contractor, the doors of Yonkers Raceway were officially closed to the public in June 2005 for construction work to begin. For almost two years, the races had to



The turn of the 21st century has ushered in an exciting period of change and expansion for the Yonkers Raceway. For many years prior to this, horse racing in New York State had been in decline. The lack of alternative gaming facilities at the race tracks had resulted in customers choosing to travel to the big gaming venues in Atlantic City and south eastern Connecticut, abandoning their interest in harness racing.

New legislation, passed in 2001 in New York State, offered a reprieve for those willing to invest. The use of video gaming machines was approved at eight tracks across the state, one of

find alternative homes. But in March 2007 the venue reopened. And even though this was done quietly, with no major advertising or promotional campaigns, Yonkers significantly outdid its nearest competitor, sealing the success of the business.

Today the new gaming complex which operates alongside the harness racing provides some 140,000 square feet of gaming space equipped with video game machines from the likes of Bally, IGT and Spielco. A strong link has also been created between the gaming and the raceway. The original 1899 racetrack name has been resurrected and reinstated, and the gaming venue is now known as



bars, an entertainment lounge and more. Named the Gotham Palace, this venue has been designed with an art deco theme reminiscent of the Empire State Building and Radio City Music Hall.

Eating out at the Empire City complex can be quite a luxurious affair. For a complete meal experience there is the Empire Terrace Restaurant which looks out over the harness racing track and provides a standard set menu in an elegant setting. The Lillian Russell Cafe offers a buffet with carving station that serves specialities that are changed on a weekly basis. The International Food Court, meanwhile, is open from 10am until 1am and offers a wide variety of foods from around the world including pizza, pasta, sausage & peppers, deli sandwiches, lo mein, chicken, dumplings, hamburgers, hot dogs, salads, fruit, and desserts.

To complete the all round experience there is an entertainment lounge which is located in the

Gotham Palace, and provides a program of live music and great shows all through the week.

The advent of the gaming facilities at Yonkers has had a positive effect on the racing events. Not only has attendance increased significantly, but Yonkers has been able to increase its investment in the sport by offering some of the biggest purses in the industry. Today, overnight races can range from \$7,000 for bottom level claimers to \$36,000 for open and open handicap events.

It wasn't until the recent economic downturn, though, that the full benefit of the investment in Empire City has really been felt. With its close proximity to New York City, it has enjoyed a considerable advantage over its gaming rivals further afield, and customers have chosen to spend their hard earned dollars locally rather than squander them on gas and lodgings. www.yonkersraceway.com



The Empire City at Yonkers Raceway.

The improvements are impressive. The first two floors of the original six storey club house have been renovated and adapted to create the spectacular Grand Victorian Hall, which accommodates over 2,000 video gaming machines as well as a restaurant. Meanwhile, a new one storey building has been constructed to house a further 3,000 video gaming machines along with an international food court,

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