

Day at the races

Spirit Mountain sponsors event at Portland Meadows

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Spirit Mountain Oregon Championship Day at Portland Meadows, when the best of Oregon-bred thoroughbreds ran their hearts out, was held Monday, Dec. 14.

Oregon's horse breeders and owners said it was the biggest money day that Oregon's only horse racing track sees.

On the third-floor Turf Club, a great buffet served owners, breeders and representatives from Spirit Mountain Casino as horses ran wild around the oval, one-mile track down below.

It was the sixth race, the Janet Wineberg Stakes, and Oregon Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association President Gay Welliver, owner of Welliver Farms in McMinnville, took more than a passing interest.

"Go, go, go!" she cried as Shame on Rosie pulled ahead.

This was the first of two "stakes" races initiated by the husband-and-wife team, Bill and Janet Wineberg, and underwritten with \$20,000 from Spirit Mountain Casino.

In all, the casino sponsored five stakes races to the tune of more than \$70,000 during the nine-race afternoon.

The casino's publicity team of Marketing Manager Greg Fritz, E-marketing Manager Chris Cherry and Marketing Sponsorship Coordinator Jocelyn Huffman also reached out to fans of Oregon horse racing with a giveaway of 2,000 casino signature blankets.

"You can get two," said 63-year-old Arnie Enkelis of Portland, which wasn't exactly true. He only had one blanket, he said, because that was all he could carry.

Enkelis visits the track weekly, he said. He also takes a teacher friend to Spirit Mountain Casino whenever he gets out to the coast, where he owns a rental house.

"I play craps," he said, "and she plays bingo."

A fount of information, Enkelis also mentioned, almost in passing, that Portland Meadows is up for sale. That remark, however, was a good bet.

With owner, Ontario, Canada-based Magna Entertainment Corp., in bankruptcy, the track is indeed for sale. The Byzantine funding structure of horse racing in Oregon today is sagging under the weight of competing entertainment options.

State gaming machines are principally the problem, said Wendie Hayes-Pounds, executive director of the Oregon Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association, but other gaming opportunities and scads of competing entertainments that have nothing to do with gaming all



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Jocelyn Huffman, middle, Marketing Sponsorship coordinator for Spirit Mountain Casino and Tribal member, is shown by Gay Welliver, right, where to go to give the trophy to the owners of the winning horse of a race during Spirit Mountain Oregon Championship Day at Portland Meadows on Monday, Dec. 14. On the left is Greg Fritz, marketing manager for Spirit Mountain Casino.

chip away at recreational dollars that at one time used to come to the track.

It's no wonder the participants were pleased to see Spirit Mountain Casino jumping in with support.

"We're so grateful," said Welliver, with Shame on Rosie heading over to the winner's circle. "At one time, horse breeding was quite extensive here. Today, we're the T-ball of horse racing."

"All of us in thoroughbred racing have discovered that a relationship between racing and casinos is the way to stay alive, to bring more people in and add credibility to the facility," Hayes-Pounds said.

The ultimate in that relationship already has a name. "Racinos" — horse and dog racetracks with casinos inside — are part of the entertainment mix in 11 states, though Oregon is not, or not yet,

one of them.

Spirit Mountain did not enter the day's races with an eye toward becoming a racino, but to be prepared, whatever the Oregon future of horse racing may hold.

As it happened, Spirit Mountain arranged the day's events as the result of a deal made with Portland Meadows at the state Legislature. The deal held off an effort by the racetrack to bring some 40 new gaming machines into the clubhouse.

"Obviously we don't want to see Portland Meadows turn into a private casino," said Tribal member and lobbyist Justin Martin, "with 40 machines now, then 200 next time. You know how it goes. We've got concerns about that just as we have concerns about a private casino in Wood Village. That being said, the Tribe has an interest in

Above, Greg Fritz, marketing manager for Spirit Mountain Casino, opens a box of stadium blankets, to have available as a giveaway, as people take one from the table during Spirit Mountain Oregon Championship Day at Portland Meadows on Monday Dec. 14.

The Tribe was a co-sponsor of the event along with the Oregon Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association as well as the Oregon Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association.

horse racing because it's an entertainment business and we're an entertainment business.

"So, that's why Grand Ronde is the main sponsor for Oregon Bred Day. And we're obviously excited about this relationship. If off-reservation gaming or private casinos were to become a reality in Oregon, we have a responsibility to our membership to look at how the new gaming market would unfold.

"That's why we're working on a relationship with Portland Meadows. If the policy changes in Oregon, we need to be prepared for that."

Beyond Spirit Mountain's sponsorship and blanket giveaway, Portland Meadows General Manager Will Alempijevic and Food & Beverage Manager Kent Hunter also pulled in about a dozen vendors.

Guests sampled wines and beers, nuts and cheeses, and had the chance to enjoy the work of Portland artist Michael Kelly, whose specialty is painting race horses in full tilt.

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