

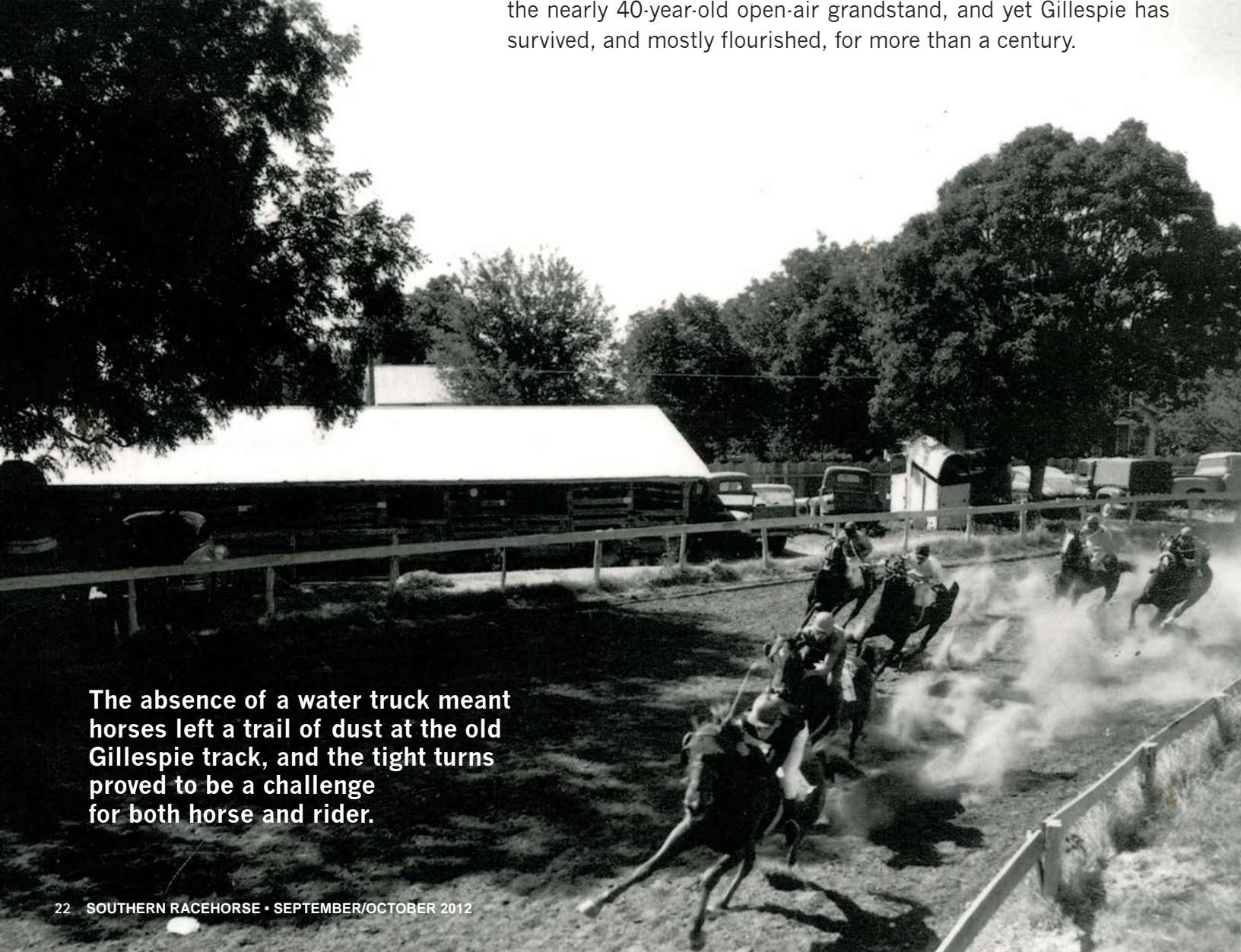
# A True *Texas* Classic

**Generations of volunteers have contributed to the success and longevity of racing in Gillespie County**

**By Denis Blake**

“Sesame Street” has long featured a learning game in which preschoolers are challenged by the song “One of These Things” to pick the object that does not fit. To play that game with the four operating Texas racetracks would provide an obvious answer—the Gillespie County Fairgrounds in the historic town of Fredericksburg. Unlike the state’s three other tracks—Lone Star Park near Dallas, Sam Houston Race Park in Houston and Retama Park near San Antonio—Gillespie does not have a multi-million-dollar grandstand or even a paved parking lot. The only air-conditioning at the track comes when a Texas Hill Country breeze blows through the nearly 40-year-old open-air grandstand, and yet Gillespie has survived, and mostly flourished, for more than a century.

Courtesy Gillespie County Fair Association



**The absence of a water truck meant horses left a trail of dust at the old Gillespie track, and the tight turns proved to be a challenge for both horse and rider.**



Gillespie's history goes back to the late 1800s, ranking it right up there with iconic ovals like Churchill Downs and Belmont Park as one of the oldest continuously-operating racetracks in the country. A big reason for its success, both during the decades without pari-mutuel racing in Texas and in recent years as fair racing has struggled across the country, is the dedicated team of tireless volunteers who operate the track and county fair, many of whom go back three or four generations.

board. "It was done, as history tells us, on a track that was dug with logs by mules and oxen to smooth it out.

"We are the oldest continuous county fair in the state, although there were a couple of war years and drought years that the fair wasn't held or was postponed," he added.

Gillespie racing moved around a bit in those early days, jumping from the Fort Martin Scott location to West Travis Street, which is now the



**ELEVENTH RACE** PURSE \$900.00  
**250 Yards — 2-Year-Olds Only**

1. Runny Toda Drum—Steelco Investments — Billy Haldroff	.....	M	2	118
2. Mighty Man Can—Shirley Wise — Doug Prade	.....	G	2	118
3. Ivois Magis—Cardice Currie — Danny Uballe	.....	M	2	118
4. Bachelors Brocher—Rudy Aquirre — Todd Taylor	.....	G	2	118
5. Miss Master Go—Angie Valjejo — Andres Guerra	.....	M	2	118
6. Bobby Sattelite—J. C. Marical — Same	.....	M	2	118

1st \_\_\_\_\_ 2nd \_\_\_\_\_ 3rd \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

**TWELFTH RACE** PURSE \$1,300.00  
**1 Mile Derby — 3-Year-Olds & Up**  
**100th Fair Derby Blanket Donor Fredericksburg Equipment**

1. Rocha De Viento—John Simon — David Latham	.....	G	4	118
2. Betrayor—Gabe Newman — Gabe Newman Jr.	.....	S	5	118
3. Ma Grande Viness—Vernon Pullin — Same	.....	S	4	118
4. War Partners—H. D. Chambers — Same	.....	G	5	118

1st \_\_\_\_\_ 2nd \_\_\_\_\_ 3rd \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

**THIRTEENTH RACE** PURSE \$0000000.00  
**100th Gillespie County Saddle Horse Race**  
**Distance — Unknown**

No.	Horse	Owner	Trainer	Jockey	Age	Wt.
1.	Tiny	—Keith Keller — Same	—Bryon Schaeffer	.....	6	213
2.	Little Don	—Otto Schumann — Same	—Dub Whitehead	.....	9	200
3.	Dynamite	—Archie Soell — Same	—Billy Roeder	.....	7	200
4.	Sally	—Dub Whitehead — Same	—Otto Schumann	.....	3	175
5.	Kraut	—Bryon Schaeffer — Same	—Archie Soell	.....	25	165
6.	Red	—Bryon Schaeffer — Same	—Gary Eckhardt	.....	16	225
7.	Hail Damage	—Arthur Jung — Same	—Keith Keller	.....	13	165
8.	Mystic	—Keith Keller — Same	—Allie Herbolt	.....	5	173

1st \_\_\_\_\_ 2nd \_\_\_\_\_ 3rd \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

Courtesy Gillespie County Fair Association

"The first race was run at Gillespie in 1881 down at the site now known as Fort Martin Scott, just a few miles away from the current location," said Troy Ottmers, a former president and third-generation director on the Gillespie County Fair and Festivals Association Inc. (GCFFA)

location of a junior high school, and then again in 1892 to a spot that is now occupied by an HEB grocery store just off U.S. Highway 290. That's where racing stayed for more than eight decades, until it moved again to its current location just outside of downtown Fredericksburg in the mid-1970s. The move predated the legalization of pari-mutuel racing in the state (or more accurately, the re-legalization as it had been legalized and then banned in the 1930s) by more than a decade, and Ottmers said that proved the wisdom of the board members at that time.

"I think the guys on the board back then, which included my dad and a lot of local business guys, saw they were outgrowing that location and that if pari-mutuel racing ever came to Texas that we would need a better and bigger facility, so that's why they moved to the new location," Ottmers said. "I like to think they had the foresight to do that and that's why we are still racing today."

### Building a racetrack

When Gillespie moved to its present location, fair officials did not have the luxury of a robust budget to build the new facility, unlike how Lone Star, Retama and Sam Houston were constructed in the 1990s.

"Probably the biggest challenge we had was when we went from the

**(Top) Although Gillespie might not get crowds quite as large as pictured here from the early days of pari-mutuel racing, the small Texas track averaged nearly 2,000 fans per day during this year's live meet.**

**A program page from 1988 shows the diversity of racing at Gillespie, from a 250-yard Quarter Horse race to a one-mile Thoroughbred derby, interestingly run with 4- and 5-year-olds, including former Louisiana Derby (G3) starter Betrayor. The final race of the day, at an "unknown" distance, featured saddle horses, with one starter apparently being 25-years-old.**





Denis Blake

**From left, Billy Roeder, Troy Ottmers and Brian Roeder are three of the many volunteers who have helped keep Gillespie running over the years.**

old fairgrounds to the spot we are at now,” remembered Billy Roeder, who has been involved with the track for more than 50 years. “The old half-mile track was only about 17 acres, and we had \$20,000 in savings and that was it. We bought 100 acres out there for the new one and put up the racetrack and the grandstand and exhibition hall.

“I think the grandstand cost about \$140,000 back then and one of the directors had the idea to sell the box seats for 10 years upfront, and it paid for the grandstand,” Roeder added about the idea, which is now commonplace in professional sports with fans buying personal seat licenses (PSLs) to secure long-term seating at new arenas and stadiums. “We sold all those upfront and wrote a check for \$140,000.”

While fair officials used creativity to fund the grandstand construction, they used sweat and hard work to construct the five-eighths-mile oval.

“We got a bid out on the inside and outside rail, and they wanted \$10,000 to do it,” said Roeder. “Hell, we didn’t have that kind of money, so we all got together with post-hole diggers, concrete and welders, and we built it. It didn’t cost the fair anything besides the supplies, and that’s the same rail that’s there today. You couldn’t really survey the curve back then, so we found the center of the track and took a piece of barbed wire and tied it to a steel post and did our measurements by driving a tractor around and putting marks in the ground. That was a lot of hard work, and our wives got a little perturbed. We all had jobs so we were out there four or five nights a week, but we had to do it and there was no doubt we were going to get it done.”

They indeed did get it done, and years later it would pay off when Gillespie ran its first-ever pari-mutuel race on May 26, 1990, with a Quarter

Horse named CS Ladybug taking an \$800 maiden race at 300 yards. The Texas-bred never won another race, but Gillespie was clearly a winner.

“We busted at the seams in those years; it was incredible,” recalled Ottmers. “That first day was like being a 6-year-old on Christ-

mas. We were pretty ignorant as far as pari-mutuel goes, so we had to bring some people in to help with that. We were the only track running at that time in 1990; Manor Downs hadn’t opened (for pari-mutuel) and Bandera Downs was delayed. I think on July 4 that year we had 7,500 people at the races. It was standing-room-only anywhere you looked.”

Gillespie wasn’t the first track to bring pari-mutuel racing back to Texas—the now long-defunct G. Rollie White Downs in Brady earned that honor in 1989—but it’s hard to argue that it hasn’t been the most successful from that era, especially now that Manor Downs near Austin is shuttered.

### **Forgotten fair circuit**

In 2002, the GCFFA received the Texas Heritage Award from the Texas Horse Racing Hall of Fame and five years later Gillespie earned induction into the Hall as one of the “historic tracks of Texas.” That list includes a range of tracks, from major ovals of the 1930s like Arlington Downs near Dallas, Epsom Downs in Houston and Alamo Downs in San Antonio, to dozens of the Lone Star State’s county fair circuit tracks, including Junction Racetrack in Junction, the Kendall County Fair in Boerne and Dutchman Downs in New Braunfels.

Of the more than 40 tracks inducted, Gillespie stands alone as the only one where you can still watch a horse race today. Efforts have been made in recent years to revive some of the old Texas fair tracks, although that

movement has yet to leave the starting gate. It's a longshot those days will ever return, at least unless some form of gaming is passed for the state's racetracks.

"It was wide open back then," Roeder recalled about the days before pari-mutuel. "We had calcuttas under a big pecan tree that's still there near HEB. Back then you had your core of people that hardly changed; it was the same trainers every year and they had the same stalls every year. Everyone knew everyone, and they'd go from Fredericksburg to Boerne to Junction to New Braunfels. We'd run a Quarter Horse in a Thoroughbred race or a Thoroughbred in a Quarter Horse race just to make a race go. Back then, it wasn't like today. You'd enter the night before and pay the entry fee, and then when the races were over on Saturday, we'd go back to the racing office and enter for Sunday. You could run a race meet with 60 horses."

Of course, regardless of what the laws might have said, it was not hard to find wagering action at Gillespie before pari-mutuel passed, although Roeder said a lot of it was as innocent as picking numbers out of a hat with the winner earning the \$1 ante put up by each of the participants.

Roeder, who just turned 70 years young, also recalls that it sometimes wasn't easy to determine which horse was in front or even which horse had won.

"We didn't have a water truck back then, so you could see them for about 50 yards and then you couldn't see them anymore because of all the dirt and dust getting kicked up," he said, adding that the old half-mile bullring lacked a long chute, so long races would require multiple laps around the track.

Part of the fun of racing at Gillespie is that things were never too serious, and fair officials would do whatever it took to attract and entertain a crowd.

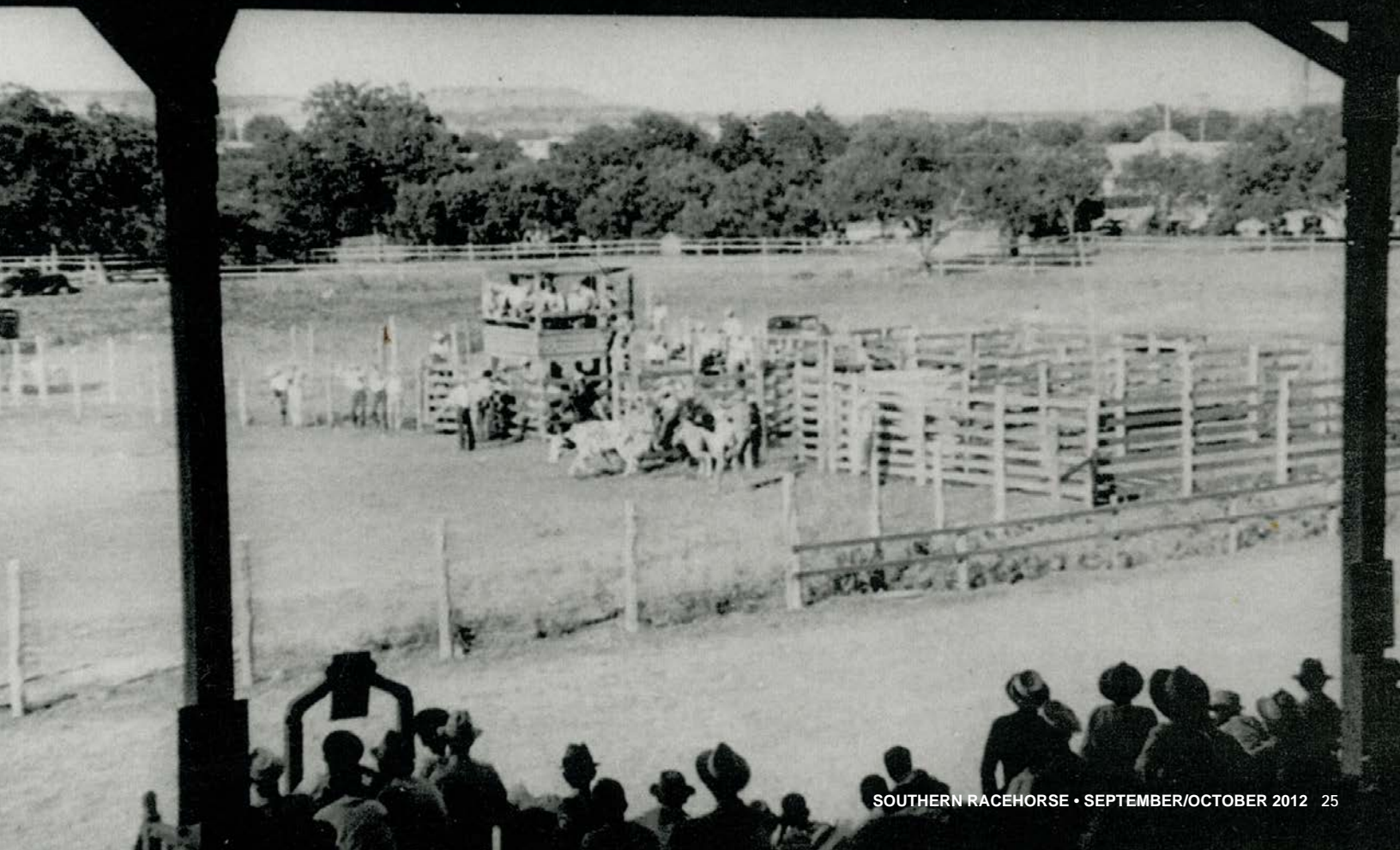
"Legend tells us that at one time there were some elephant races here," said Ottmers. "We used to have what you would call 'night shows' in front of the grandstand that were often circus acts or trapeze acts, and, as I understand it, there were some elephants and they just decided to race them one of the days of the fair, although I'm not sure what year that was. They did all kinds of things over the years; they were quite creative."

While most of the racing at Gillespie has involved horses, including harness and saddle-bred contests, the track has also had bicycle racing, mule racing and even human foot races, among other events. Again proving the point that Gillespie has run just about any and every kind of race, Roeder recalled an event back in the 1960s or '70s when the track ran a 220-yard match race with riderless horses. The horses, perhaps in an

Courtesy Gillespie County Fair Association

### Photo Caption

This photo, believed to be from the 1930s, shows rodeo preparations being made in the infield of the old Gillespie oval.







Courtesy Gillespie County Fair Association

effort to show their owners that they were a little smarter than had been assumed, ran through an open gate after crossing the finish line and then raced out onto the main road.

“Everybody was at the track that day, so there were hardly any cars on the road and we eventually caught up to the horses,” recalled Roeder, adding that both horses were fine and that before such an event was run again assurances were made that all open gates were closed.

### Entering the 21st century

It might be true that things don't move quite as fast in Fredericksburg (population: about 10,000) as compared to Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio, but fair officials did take a bold step in 2003 with the opening of The Race Barn. The simulcast building that sits not far from the grandstand could match strides with just about any other facility in the country and far exceeds what one might expect to find at a county fair track.

“We wouldn't be here today without that,” said Ottmers. “I'll never forget that Paula Flowerday, who used to be the executive director of the Texas Racing Commission, was here years ago and she said, ‘Here's the deal guys, you are not going to survive unless you simulcast.’ We formed a partnership with Gulf Greyhound Park (in La Marque, Texas), and we basically drew up The Race Barn on the back of a beer flap one night. They came in, and with the help of a lot of people, we built that thing and it's really paid off.”

The Race Barn helps generate purse money for Gillespie and gives area residents access to the best Quarter Horse, Thoroughbred and Greyhound simulcasting on a year-round basis.

“The Texas Racing Commission has been unbelievable; it's not that

**Located near Fredericksburg, Morris Ranch, shown here in a 1902 photo, was one of the nation's top breeding and training operations of the era and once home to more than 200 broodmares and 10 stallions.**

we got by with anything, but they walked us through things even though they were dealing with a bunch of country bumpkins up here,” said Ottmers, laughing. “Before The Race Barn, we were probably paying \$60,000 to \$80,000 per year out of the association's pocket for purses, and we couldn't

survive like that. This has done everything we could have envisioned.”

Gillespie traditionally offers eight days of live racing each year. The track runs every other weekend to make it possible for a horse to make up to four starts during the meet, and the final weekend coincides with the rides and festivities of the annual Gillespie County Fair.

For their mixed meet in 2012, Gillespie reported some impressive figures with total attendance of 14,854 (including an robust crowd of 3,663 on the final Saturday) and live handle of nearly \$1.3 million (all on-track as Gillespie does not simulcast their races to other tracks), which equates to averages of 1,856 fans and \$161,516 in wagering per day.

### Doin' it for nothing

Although Gillespie has traditionally catered more to Quarter Horse racing, with this year's meet including a \$120,400 dash for 2-year-olds, Thoroughbreds have enjoyed an expanded presence at the track in recent years. This year's Thoroughbred action included the \$13,400 Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Stakes with H and H Ranch's Texas-bred Solar Charge winning by more than 15 lengths to set a new track record at six furlongs and Turner Coats' Lucky Raja taking the \$19,000 GCFA Texas-Bred Stakes in an upset. It doesn't take long to run the eight-day meet at Gillespie, just as it doesn't take long to do payroll at the track with only a handful of people earning a paycheck, mostly in the race office and teller windows. The rest are volunteers.

“There’s no doubt that the volunteers are the key to success,” said Ottmers. “The first few years of pari-mutuel we had a paid general manager to get us off the ground and we had a mutuels manager that was a paid position. The race office is paid staff, because we don’t know the ins-and-outs of that, but after the third year we took over as general manager with someone volunteering from the board.”

Both Ottmers and Roeder mentioned the long tradition of racing in the area as another key to success. Morris Ranch near Fredericksburg was one of the top Thoroughbred breeding and training facilities around the turn of the 20th century, and National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame and Texas Horse Racing Hall of Fame member Maximilian “Max” Hirsch, who trained Texas-bred Triple Crown winner Assault for the famed King Ranch, was born in Fredericksburg.

“There are a lot of people in Fredericksburg that take pride in this, and I think that shows,” said Ottmers. “We want to put on a good show and do something for the community. It’s been a big tradition in Fredericksburg for a long time.”

**“There are a lot of people in Fredericksburg that take pride in this, and I think that shows. We want to put on a good show and do something for the community.”**

With only a pair of modest Thoroughbred stakes and with maiden and allowance horses competing for around \$5,000 to \$7,000 per race, no one is getting rich running their horses at Gillespie. Of course, the volunteers are not getting rich either, except with experiences they wouldn’t trade for a pile of money.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything, and in all the years I’ve been there, I’ve never received a dollar of pay,” said Roeder, whose sons Brian and Brad are fourth-generation members of the board, which comprises nearly 50 directors. “I started on the track in 1959 as a pony boy and stayed on ever since. I’ve only missed one race meet since then. I went from pony boy to fair director to general manager and then back out on the track again, and then they kind of put me out to pasture. Now I sell beer in the beer garden (or ‘bier garten’ to stay true to the region’s German roots).

“I wouldn’t take back one minute of it,” he added. “It’s going to go on for a long time here. I’m just thankful that the horsemen still come and run. There’s really not enough money to make a living at it, so it’s got to be for the sport of it.” ☆

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