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Pocono Downs celebrating 50 years of racing

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PLAINS TWP. — The ceremonial ribbon-cutting was July 15, 1965.

Mohegan Sun Arena and casino, the Pavilion at Montage and PNC Field did not exist.

More than 12,000 fans showed up to embrace the area’s new attraction: Pocono Downs.

“So if you wanted sports entertainment, we were the only venue,” Vice President of Racing Dale Rapson said. “It’s so completely different today.”

Indeed much has changed, including its name (now The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono), the legalization of various other forms of betting and the way races are watched.

But the Plains Twp. racetrack has made its way to this week’s 50th anniversary of Pocono Downs — and it is thriving.

“We have the top horses, trainers and drivers in the country racing here,” Rapson, 63, said. “Plus we have a great facility for the fans. You come out here on a summer night ... it’s one of the nicest places in the country to be.”

Beyond harness racing, The Downs has been known to roll out the red carpet for entertainment.

Past guests of baseball celebrity — Mickey Mantle, Stan Musial, Mike Schmidt, Steve Carlton, Whitey Ford — could assemble an all-star team.

A list of chart-topping musical acts that performed there — Bon Jovi, Guns N’ Roses and Aerosmith — reads like the headliners of a rock-and-roll festival.

But after all it is still a racetrack.

Jay Bergman, an industry expert and award-winning columnist who has written for multiple racing publications, said The Downs’ surface is soft and forgiving as well as fast.

“They’ve mastered the art of keeping a track in great condition,” Bergman said.

Just last year, The Downs showed how fast it could be when Swedish horse Sebastian K trotted the fastest mile in the history of the sport at 1:49.

While it’s widely regarded as one of the best harness racetracks in the country, this was not always the case.

Around the time Rapson was hired as a promotions director in 1980, Pocono Downs was mired in bankruptcy and seen as a racetrack for competitors not good enough to race at the better tracks.

But that started to change in the early 1980s when Pocono Downs was purchased by Joseph B. Banks, who oversaw many technological adjustments and upgraded the track surface.

In keeping up with the changes since and helping build a prestigious image, Rapson credited the staff.

“The reason we’re successful ... is the employees over the past years,” he said. “Without them, Pocono Downs probably would have never made it through the tough times.”

The Downs at Mohegan Sun Pocono is now owned by The Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority, and paired with a casino.

Whereas other racetracks have lost that “racetrack vibe” when paired with a casino — a “racino” — The Downs has kept its

racing atmosphere.

“That’s a big thing from a horseman’s perspective,” Bergman said, “and that’s what’s given them the overall respect of the racing industry as a whole.”

The Downs hosts about 1,500 races per season. A weekend night will typically draw 700 to 800 attendees.

One of the biggest nights of the year is just a few days away: Super Stakes Saturday featuring more than \$2 million in purses, a special 5:30 p.m. post time and superb racing.

“The product we’re putting on Saturday is the best racing really that you can find anywhere in the country on Saturday,” said track announcer of eight years Jim Beviglia, a longtime fan of the sport who recalls making picks as a 5-year-old based on which horse had the best name.

Saturday will also feature baseball legend Pete Rose signing autographs in the racing lobby from 4-6 p.m.; and a fireworks display set for 10:30 p.m.

Also Saturday, the aforementioned record-breaking Sebastian K will be retired in a formal ceremony.

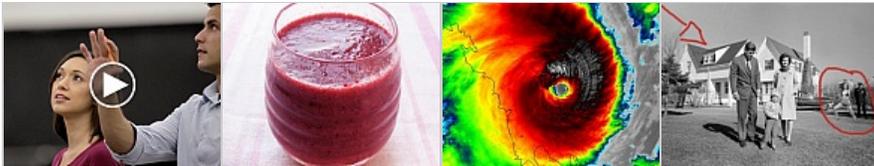
Tonight and Wednesday will feature specials when The Downs rolls back prices to 1965 on hot dogs, soft drinks, popcorn and programs.

“I just thought that the promotions we’re doing will bring back memories to our older fans,” Rapson said, “yet it’ll still be exciting for the new fans.”

There will be live racing tonight, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

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