



Making Claims

by Joe Nevills
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I know what you're thinking.

"Who is this guy with the sunglasses, and why does he keep showing up in my Arabian Finish Line?"

Allow me to give a brief introduction.

I am a recent graduate of Central Michigan University and have followed horse racing since I picked my first winner at the age of five, seated next to my grandpa at Mount Pleasant Meadows. The horse was an Arabian named Fast Dance, who I selected because I liked the name.

Pool hustler Dan McGoorty once said that one of the worst things that can happen in life is to win a bet on a horse at an early age, but I can't imagine how it all would have turned out any other way.

My adventures in turf writing began in 2008 as an intern with Thoroughbred Times. Since then, my work has appeared in publications including Thoroughbred Times TODAY, The Midwest Thoroughbred and on ThoroFan.com. In between print gigs, I cover racing topics in Michigan and elsewhere on my blog, The Michigan-Bred Claimer.

I admittedly came into racing through the Thoroughbred door. Thoroughbreds were the family business, and my journalistic pursuit of the breed has taken me to the sport's highest levels; including several up-close encounters with super-mare Zenyatta at last year's Breeders' Cup.

Amidst the world-class action, though, I could often be found speaking with a televangelist's enthusiasm about my home track in central Michigan.

Mount Pleasant Meadows is where I got my first exposure to Arabian racing. As an armchair photographer, I found them the most photogenic of the racing breeds and always looked forward to watching them compete.

Until recently, my experience with Arabian racing consisted only of the breed's smallest North American outpost. That changed after the Darley Awards.

Meeting horsemen and women from around the country and hearing their concerns taught me a great deal about the breed and its small, but dedicated corner of the racing world. I can't promise I will remember everyone's names, but I will remember how welcome I felt by those I met.

Looking back on the weekend, there were a few things that stuck out.

1. Our unique problems aren't that different.

My home state has struggled with expanded gaming (slots) for years while its neighbors prosper. On such an island, it's easy to forget the other states in the same boat. I had numerous discussions with horsemen from California and Texas who told the same story as mine, almost word-for-word. Perhaps we could one day put our heads together to achieve our common goal, or at least organize a meeting place for a support group.

2. Sam Houston Race Park is a cool track.

From what I had read and observed, Sam Houston seemed like a racetrack willing to go outside the box to bring in new fans. The track lived up to its reputation. The buzz that runs through the crowd when the indoor grandstand lights dim at post time has to be experienced to truly appreciate. If the place ever gets slots, there will be no stopping it.

3. Civil discussion in racing is alive and well.

When I saw a "Brainstorming Breakfast" on the weekend's schedule, I was unsure of what to expect. I have witnessed many an industry discussion, in person and online, decay into pettiness and shouting matches. The breakfast was not without some spirited exchanges, but I was impressed with the general courtesy of the conversations. In a time when racing has become more focused than ever on personal survival, it was refreshing to see people who realize we are all in this together.

4. Arabian racing has plenty of marketable horses.

As each nominee was listed during the Darley Awards ceremony, a video clip displayed outstanding efforts by each horse. While watching them, I realized many of these horses have qualities not unlike their Thoroughbred cousins. Mainstream-types will recall Grilla from his win at Keeneland last year. With star running back Tiki Barber preparing for a return to the gridiron, his namesake horse could present some interesting cross-promotional opportunities. Sandd Piper has that "it" factor that could make her a crossover star. If these horses are marketed and presented correctly, they could help Arabian racing gain new fans.

I'll be the first to admit that I still have a lot to learn about Arabian racing, from bloodlines and history to the national scene. After a weekend with the field's best and brightest, I am more excited to dive in than ever.

I hope you will join me on the road to enlightenment.