

The Return of the Sport of Kings



Aerial view of Santa Anita in 1934. In the background Smoot's abandoned track can be seen.

The conclusion of a 7-part series about horse racing in early Los Angeles County.

by Leonard N. Wynne

From the summer of 1932 until the spring of 1933, there was a surge in efforts to build race tracks in California – despite the fact that racetrack gambling was still illegal in the state. When queried about the legality of such a venture, Joseph Smoot, the man leading the project to build a racetrack at Santa Anita, remarked that there “is no law against the building of a race track.”¹ Although Smoot admitted that gambling would likely take place – privately between individuals – he reaffirmed his pledge that the operation of the racetrack would always be conducted within the laws of the state – being funded exclusively through donations. The success of such a venture would, however, require one racetrack to establish itself as the preeminent racing facility in the region, holding off all would-be competitors. The rush of various organizations to open the first track was halted, ironically, by the one goal that they all desired – the legalization of racetrack gambling in California.

The passage of Proposition 3 in July of 1933 not only legalized pari-mutuel gambling at racetracks in California, but it also created the California Horse Racing Board. The CHRB was invested with the sole authority to regulate the licensing and operations of all racetracks in the state, and it was made clear that permits to conduct

horse racing would only be awarded to organizations which displayed sound financial standing, with members of proven integrity. Additionally, the CHRB required all applications to include a “good faith” deposit of \$10,000 to secure a permit to conduct racing.

If there were any questions about how rigid the CHRB would be in maintaining their pledge to allow only organizations of the highest caliber to conduct racing, they were answered when the board convened for its first session to review the applications presented to them. Meeting with representatives of several racing organizations in early October, 1933, the CHRB would reject all but one of the applications – that of the **St. Francis Jockey Club**, which was seeking a permit to build a racetrack in the city of San Francisco.

In Southern California, with the Los Angeles Jockey Club having abandoned its efforts to build a track in Arcadia, and the California Jockey Club having shifted its attention from Baldwin Park to the Bay Area, proposing to build a track in San Mateo, the one hope for Santa Anita lay in the hands of a group of racing promoters the press had dubbed the “Millionaire Jockey Club.” This group, headed by Hollywood producer **Hal Roach**, had originally sought to build a racetrack in Culver City. Although denied their initial request for a permit, the “Millionaire Club” was encouraged by CHRB chairman **Carleton Burke** to continue their efforts to strengthen their organization, and to then apply again. Burke later optimistically reported to the press that although no decisions had been made at the meeting, “we expect to see horse racing in Southern California next spring.”²

Enter the "Doc"

Back in Los Angeles, Hal Roach and his associates – having now formed the **Los Angeles Turf Club** – immediately stepped up their efforts to secure the financial backers who would allow them to meet all the CHRB requirements. Although they initially planned to have a membership composed solely of Southern California residents, Roach and the Los Angeles Turf Club made the decision to look North, to San Francisco, for the support of the man responsible for securing the first permit the CHRB had issued – **Dr. Charles Strub**.

Charles “Doc” Strub was a dentist by trade, but a sportsman at heart. Having been the captain of the baseball teams at both Santa Clara University and the University of California, and for a time playing in the minor leagues in California, Strub's first love was baseball. Having become very successful in his San Francisco dentistry practice, Strub soon realized his dream of becoming one of the owners of the San Francisco Seals baseball team, ultimately rising to the presidency of that organization.³

When racetrack gambling was legalized in 1933, Strub, who had also been a fan of racing since his youth, was anxious to get involved in the rebirth of California horse racing. Having enjoyed great success in every venture he had undertaken, Strub was largely responsible for the St. Francis Jockey Club being awarded the first permit to build a track by the CHRB in late 1933. The plans of the St. Francis Jockey Club to build a new track in the city of San Francisco would, however, face stiff local opposition. When the city ultimately voted to reject the proposed track, Strub and his organization reluctantly decided not to fight a second time, and abandoned their

plans.

Back to the Drawing Board

The sudden demise of the St. Francis Jockey Club would have a significant impact on the future of racing in California. With the plans to build a track in San Francisco abandoned, William Kyne and his California Jockey Club – which had earlier been denied a racing permit – quickly worked to gain the approval of the CHRB for the proposed **Bay Meadows** race track. Meanwhile, Charles Strub, who was still anxious to be involved in horse racing, accepted the offer of Hal Roach and the Los Angeles Turf Club to travel South, and to join that organization's efforts to open a track in Southern California.

On his arrival in Southern California, Strub joined with Roach and other members of the Los Angeles Turf Club in their efforts to secure backers for the project. Rather than seeking out just a select few wealthy individuals, Roach and Strub began a campaign, calling on many prominent Angelenos to offer individual subscriptions to the organization for the sum of \$5,000 each. Derided by other racing promoters for their “door to door” approach to funding their project, the Los Angeles Turf Club would soon have the satisfaction of proving their detractors wrong – raising the one million dollars in needed funding. On January 4, 1934, Roach and Strub presented the CHRB with their application, and a check for \$10,000.⁴ A week later the permit was secured, and the work on the new track was begun with all haste.

The Race to the Wire

Prior to the approval of their permit, the Los Angeles Turf Club had considered three possible sites on which to build their proposed racetrack. The most desirable to the organization was the old Baldwin ranch, with the beautiful San Gabriel Mountains serving as a backdrop. The one limitation to the Arcadia site was that, despite the improvements that had previously been completed by Smoot, the property offered little opportunity for future expansion – and even at that time Strub and his associates were looking to the future. When Anita Baldwin agreed to sell a large portion of land just to the East – where once Lucky Baldwin's vineyards and winery had stood – the future of racing at Santa Anita was assured.⁵

On March 26, 1934, a thousand spectators gathered for the groundbreaking ceremony at the new Santa Anita Park. Anita Baldwin, who was traveling in Europe at the time, was not on hand to reenact the ceremonial passing on of Baldwin's colors that had marked the groundbreaking for Smoot's attempt to build a new Santa Anita the year before. Nevertheless, the event did carry on the tradition of uniting the old with the new, as Jack Fisher, an elderly African-American blacksmith who had turned a shovel of dirt at the ground-breaking of Baldwin's original track, was given the opportunity to do the same at the new Santa Anita Park.⁶

With the formalities concluded, the Los Angeles Turf Club immediately began the construction of the new facility. The task ahead of them was, no doubt, daunting, and many viewed the plans to have the track open by the following February unrealistic. All such doubts would soon be expelled, as it was announced that progress on the track was far ahead of schedule, and that Santa Anita would be ready for racing by Christmas Day. In a

period of just over eight months, the racing oval, stables for 1,000 horses, and a beautiful Art Deco clubhouse and grandstand, designed by the well known architect **Gordon Kaufmann** had been completed.⁷

The Great Race Place

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1935
Santa Anita Handicap
\$100,000

Handicap for three-year-olds and upwards. By subscription of \$100, which shall accompany the nomination, starters to pay \$1000 additional to the winner, with \$100,000 added of which \$50,000 to second, \$25,000 to third and \$25,000 to fourth. Weight, December 15, 1934. No position starters must be named through the entry box the day preceding the race by 10:30 A. M.

ONE MILE AND A QUARTER

Wt.	Name	Owner
110	Kaulbars	C. V. Winner
110	Cavalade	Montecito Stable
110	Twelve Grand	Woodrow Stable
110	Stalwart	Woodrow Stable
110	Malik	A. S. Haskin
110	Patron	William Woodward
110	Hot Supply	F. A. Garrison
110	Mr. Knapton	Charles Farm
110	Assault	F. M. Allen, Jr.
110	Good Star	Miss Alice B. Mann
110	Ladman	W. C. ...
107	Stunt	H. A. Schwaartz
107	Trub. Star	Mal. ...
110	Stewart	H. S. ...
110	Stavron	Northern Stable
100	Top New	W. H. ...
100	Blue Park	California Stable
100	Lombard	John ...
100	Frank Ormond	W. H. ...
100	Sweeping Light	F. H. ...
100	Gay World	F. A. ...
100	Good Good	Montecito Stable
100	Harada	F. A. ...
100	High Way	C. V. ...
100	Devil	F. M. ...
100	Good Hunter	J. ...
100	Phoebe	John ...
100	Gay Mountain	A. C. ...
100	Blue Mink	H. S. ...
100	Joker	A. S. ...
100	Thunderbolt	F. M. ...
100	My Throat	A. S. ...
100	Polars	F. M. ...
100	Pat no. ...	K. E. ...
100	Trumbull	John ...
100	Harvard	T. C. ...
100	Mad Prince	A. C. ...
100	Victor ...	Miss A. C. ...
100	Champion	H. S. ...
100	Book X	Trumbull Farm
100	Remedy	Miss A. C. ...
100	Dark Water	F. M. ...
100	Waverly	California Stable
100	Chance Link	Miss E. ...
100	Val Clark	F. N. ...
100	Harvard	Miss H. ...
100	Edward ...	California Stable
100	Indisposed	F. M. ...
100	Pop ...	California Stable
100	Shogun	F. D. ...
100	Manzan	James ...
100	Van ...	North ...
100	Willow ...	D. J. ...
100	Good ...	A. A. ...
100	Belton	H. ...
100	Proctor	J. M. ...
100	Orlando	Green ...
100	Orion	Green ...
100	Pink ...	Edna ...
100	Waxy ...	Edna ...
100	Ray	W. ...
100	Madras	H. ...
100	Big ...	H. ...
100	Hand ...	H. ...
100	Joe ...	F. D. ...
100	Good ...	Florida ...
100	Big ...	California ...
100	Lady ...	F. ...
100	Good ...	E. C. ...

By early December the first horses began to arrive at Santa Anita, in preparation for the highly anticipated race meet that would be highlighted by the Santa Anita Handicap, a stakes race with a purse of \$100,000 – the highest ever offered in the nation.⁸

On Christmas Day, 1934, despite the hardships of the depression – or perhaps motivated by it – a crowd of some 39,000 eagerly arrived at the beautiful new facility in Arcadia. Shortly after 1:30 PM that afternoon, a cheer went up from the crowd in the stands as a brown mare named Las Palmas became the first horse to cross the finish line at the new Santa Anita Park, winning the first race of the day – The Greetings. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since the original Santa Anita had closed its gates when, on this day, in the shadow of the very same mountains, racing fans hailed the return of the Sport of Kings to Southern California.⁹

Photos courtesy of Arcadia Public Library.

Related posts:

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1 Los Angeles Times, January 1, 1933, A2.

2 Los Angeles Times, October 12, 1933, A9.

3 Beckwith, B.K., The Story of Santa Anita, 13.

4 Los Angeles Times, January 4, 1934, A9.

5 Anita Baldwin was paid \$236,500 for the initial piece of property, and ultimately the LATC would more than double the size of the land purchased. Los Angeles Times, January 10, 1934, A11.

6 Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1934, A11.

7 The track as it opened in 1934 was considerably smaller than it is today. Between 1935 and 1938 additions to both the clubhouse and the grandstand would practically double the size of the track.

8 A general estimate places the \$100,000 value from 1935 to be the equivalent of approximately \$1,500,000 in 2007.

9 Racing actually took place at fair meets before the major racetracks as the facilities were already built and fair racing was managed differently. The opening of the modern Santa Anita was preceded by Alameda County Fair, Bay Meadows, and the Los Angeles County Fair.

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