

Before they were off!

Horse racing, the "sport of kings" as it is called, established a place in the Westside when Frank Vessels Sr. began holding informal match races on the Vessels Ranch in 1947.



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WESTSIDE
STORY

Coming to California from Kentucky in 1920, Vessels had exactly \$19 in his pocket. After 30 years of developing his construction company that built platforms for the oil business, his dream came true when he built a race track, the Los Alamitos Race Course, on his 435-acre ranch.

On Dec. 4, 1951, the track opened with 3,076 in attendance. In 1955, the track received national attention when a winning horse with the appealing name Go Man Go increased attendance and profited.

Horse racing has been around since about 4500 BC but evolved to become closer to our version when Charles I (1625-1649) of Britain established racing rules and made the hobby a "Sport of Kings."

In the United States, "without gambling, there would be no horse racing," according to author William Murray in his book "The Wrong Horse."

When Vessels started his informal races, the match races provided a means for sweaty ranch hands to have a little fun at the end of a hard day's work by wagering a dollar or two on horses lined up in dusty streets. By contrast, horse racing today is big business.

According to the state's budget figures, revenue from horse racing reached a high of \$148 million in 1991 and declined to \$42.5 million in 2005, including satellite wagering.

Locally, the largest daily handle (the total amount of money bet) at Santa Anita in



COURTESY OF LOS ALAMITOS RACE COURSE
Go Man Go drew national attention to Los Alamitos in 1955.

2005 was \$22.7 million set on March 5, Los Alamitos highest daily handle last year was \$2.2 million on Nov. 5.

Santa Anita and Hollywood Park opened in 1934 and 1938, respectively. Both run thoroughbreds. The Los Alamitos Race Course runs primarily quarter horses, but also some Arabians and thoroughbreds. As a point of reference, quarter horse racing at Los Alami-

tos preceded the Ducks, Angels, Dodgers and Lakers.

Horse racing in California and nationwide is experiencing a steady decline in percent share of total gambling revenues. There's also a shift in player betting from on-track to off-track sites.

Yet, horse racing remains a popular pastime at this local track. In 1960, the Los Alamitos Race Course was annexed

into Cypress.

Gambling dollars funnel to the state and the city. With Cypress earning 0.33 percent of each dollar wagered, the race course has generated about \$905,000 per year for the last several years for the city.

Jane Smiley in her book "A Year at the Races" calls racing "a business, an art, an athletic contest, a moral and a spiritual test."

Horse racing packs a nostalgic wallop and a huge financial stake for owners, tracks and government coffers. But in the end, it's all about difference of opinion, for without it, as they say, there wouldn't be horse racing.

Sources: Los Alamitos Race Course, www.derbypost.com, www.dof.ca.gov, www.santaanita.com, city of Cypress

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