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GULFSTREAM 2/24/05

MARCH 3, 2005



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MARCH 3, 2005

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Gulfstream 2/24/05

I have never believed that Magna Entertainment is the root of all evil, or even the bogey man of the racing industry. So I was more than prepared to give Magna some slack over conditions at Gulfstream. How could it be so bad?

Why should watching racing and eating lunch by a tent create problems? The fanciest of gatherings are regularly held in tents. Some of the more enjoyable race meetings are held under county fair conditions. Given the average 75 degree weather in South Florida in winter, an outdoor meeting should be most enjoyable. Kettle corn, sunshine, and horse racing – Could there be a better trifecta?

Gulfstream wasn't the county fair of my dreams. It made the old Great Barrington Fair in Massachusetts seem like Royal Ascot. It was still far better than Scarborough Downs in Maine, but that's not saying much.

First, you pull into the track from Hallandale Beach Boulevard on a weekday and follow the signs for parking. But once you park, there's no indication of where the entrance to the track is. I just waited a while and just followed the path of the regulars to the entrance at the head of the stretch.

Opening day complaints on Gulfstream focused on the lack of pari-mutuel machines. With an announced crowd of about 5,000, there were no significant waits for machines. The TV screens showing simulcasts in the tents were clear. On the other hand, the benches around the temporary paddock were dirty, and the matrix boards used to show Gulfstream's own races were indistinct. Somebody should have located Kenny Noe in nearby Plantation and gotten him to clean the track.

The buzzer that announces the start of each race and also announces that the race is official was not like anything I've heard at a track before. It sounded like a Pavlovian experiment gone astray. I expected to receive some electric shock therapy whenever I heard the buzzer.

But the problems got worse as the day unfolded. It started to rain, and for an hour, it poured in the typical South Florida fashion. It probably rained a half an inch. Nobody tells you that the wagering tent floods when it rains. All you can do is look for a dry patch where you are both protected from the rain and from the waters. The tent looked like my basement when the sump pump breaks down. Gulfstream may have the oldest crowd in American racing, and there were several senior citizens using four pronged walkers fording through the waters to reach the pari-mutuel windows.

Nor was there any kettle corn. In fact, there was scarcely any food unless you paid extra for seating in some of the protected quarters. There was no pizza forcing me to settle for a hotdog. After the rain ended with about five races left on the card, I searched for some ice cream. But, alas after the rain, the ice cream vendor had vanished.

If there was a saving grace, it was the turf track. After the rains started, I was just waiting for the announcement that the races were coming off the turf. The announcement never came. Instead the turf course was simply downgraded to “good,” and claiming horse still ran a mile and one eighth in 1:48.

I’d like to be able to say that I saw this awesome turf course. But since the apron of the track is so low, there is no trackside view of the turf course itself.

A fan is left to hope that Magna will deliver on its promises for the 2006 season, and will turn Gulfstream into a palace for racing. But right now even in the middle of the Gulfstream season, one can only sound like an ex-Brooklyn Dodger fan, concede and wait for next year.