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MAGNA NIRVANA

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Magna Nirvana

I'm not mincing words. I want the finder's fee. I found Frank Stronach's utopia, and I ought to get paid for it.

As part of an international quest for simulcast sites, I found myself in Southwestern Arizona near the border between Arizona and Mexico in the city of Yuma, Arizona. Yuma is a city of 77,000 noted primarily for its unbearably hot summers and its status as the snowbird and RV capital of the Southwest in the winter. There is no city of more than 20,000 in Arizona within a 2-hour drive from Yuma. Early in the morning, I sampled the simulcast site in Alagadones, in Baja California, just to the southwest of Yuma. It was clean but far too quiet for my tastes. The only other prospective bettors present were arguing over the point spread between Manhattan and Iona, and the prospect of a two hour wait to recross the border if I stuck around for the Santa Anita simulcast made me look for US alternatives.

The only gambling alternative is the one OTB site in Yuma, which is located at Yuma Greyhound Park. This is a racetrack in name only. There's a shell of a building with a grandstand and a clubhouse, but it has been years since there was any racing at the greyhound track. Yet, what I found should have been enough to merit a call to Aurora, Ontario. Frank Stronach, where are you? I want my finder's fee. I found your Nirvana. If you're looking for an active entertainment center with a small side order of betting, Yuma Greyhound Park is your destination.

The Greyhound Park was jumping on Sunday morning and afternoon. There were almost no parking spaces. It literally took me 20 minutes to find a spot on a dirt gully. There had to be more than 5,000 people at the dog track.

There also was a fee for admission. It was fifty cents to get in. But what did you get for the money? First of all, before you reached the track, there was an enormous swap meet with a huge crowd in the backyard. You name it; it was there at the swap meet. You wanted vegetables, As Seen On TV merchandise, used hardware equipment, hand-carved redwood signs, tons of silk flowers, dresses, fry bread, hot dogs. They were selling it. \$5 watches, 3 T-shirts for \$10, 2 dresses for \$10 – You came to the right place. I had to push my way through the people to get to the track where the simulcasts were housed.

I half-expected to see nobody inside the track except for the normal simulcasting reprobates. But in fact, the track itself was nearly as crowded as the back yard. There was, however, one catch. The crowd inside the track was there to see a country music/snowbird concert. The entire grandstand of the track was full of people attending the concert. Who needed David Cassidy or Cindi Lauper?

Only the clubhouse was reserved for the simulcasting, and it was a relief from the crowds at the other parts of the facility. There were about 25 people in the clubhouse for simulcasts. Some were not bettors, but had come to the clubhouse because it was the most peaceful spot at the track. Others were trying to catch a glimpse of the concert

without having to pay for a grandstand seat. There were probably at least 15 people playing horses. There was one pari-mutuel clerk and one SAM machine.

Not only did bettors have to fight through the swap meet and the concert, but they also had to deal with deciphering the vagaries of the Turf Paradise simulcast product and program. Programs were poorly xeroxed copies of faxes. In order to read the programs, you needed to return to the swap meet to acquire a pair of magnifying lenses. The simulcasting menu itself featured races 1-3 at Fair Grounds, races 3-5 at Tampa Bay Downs, and races 2-4 at Gulfstream. It would have added races 3-5 from Aqueduct, but Aqueduct was cancelled that day. You'd watch a simulcast from one track, and they'd change tracks before the race became official and the prices were announced. It was like the old Woodie Allen joke about the restaurant with bad food and such small portions. Not only was the actual program unreadable, but the limited menu of races was also unplayable. It was enough to drive you back to Algodones or perhaps downstairs to Stephe's Fashions for some T-shirts or Black Hills Gold for some jewelry or some watches.

But it was perfect for Frank Stronach's Shangri-La – his vision of the synergistic track of the future. There was a huge crowd. The parking lot was fuller than any winter day at Aqueduct. The customers – outside the simulcasting center – were enthusiastic. There was betting and a world of alternatives to betting. There was shopping, concerts and food. It was the true Gulfstream in Arizona, and it probably could be Frank's for a pittance. Too bad, nobody bets there, but the Magna track of the future already exists most every winter weekend near downtown Yuma.