



# BACK TO LIFE: TURF PARADISE KICKS OFF 57-DAY MEET DESPITE OFFSEASON CLOSURE TALK - CRONKITE NEWS

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*Photo: Top of My Game finished third in the first race at Turf Paradise Monday. The track kicked off a surprising 57-day meet following talk of closure in the offseason. (Photo by Daniella Trujillo/Cronkite News)*

Almost 70 years of tradition, community and racing have stemmed from a plot of land off Bell Road in north Phoenix. Just months ago, amid a failed ownership change, nobody knew if the racetrack on that land, Turf Paradise, would ever open its doors again.

That all changed Monday as the track hosted its first race of a 57-day meet running through the Kentucky Derby on May 4.

“The last couple of months have been a rollercoaster ride for us,” said Vince Francia, the general manager of Turf Paradise. “(Track owner Jerry Simms) wants to sell it to someone who wants to keep the racing going.”

Simms hoped to sell the track in September but the deal fell apart several weeks ago. Simms has said he wants to retire but wants to first ensure the stability and future of the facility.

The first professional sports venue in Phoenix has made itself the home away from home for generations of people working in and around horse racing. It has cultivated an environment and culture including people from every corner of the state who have dedicated their lives to the sport.

Justin Evans, a local horse trainer, is one of those people whose life circles around the equestrian world.

“I am so grateful for the racehorses because everything I ever got in my life was paid for by a racehorse,” Evans said. “It’s not a business to us here, they’re family.”

The word “family” echoed throughout the day in every conversation, whether it was a fan in attendance or Darrell Hair, the western regional manager for the Jockeys’ Guild who represents and protects a majority of riders in America.

“There’s so much pride, and hopefully now with the doors open, and they can continue to be (open),” Hair said about the expected reception for Turf Paradise’s return. “Hoping everything goes according where this racetrack can stay open and thrive.”

The main focus throughout was being able to return and maintain a home for the horses, trainers, jockeys and gift shop attendants who have worked in Turf Paradise for decades.



Monday, the stands and betting windows filled up just after noon in anticipation of the first race that started at 12:45 p.m. The moment the starter gun fired was a return to normal for the track.

In between races, the track provided a easy-going atmosphere that contrasted the high-intensity minutes of action. Fans lingered at the bar and lounge are, or placed wagers at the onsite Unibet Sportsbook room.

"I think it gives people another option, for people to get outside and enjoy Arizona," said Ellen Pfenninger, a seasonal resident.

The timing of the races is key to providing those options. With the window from January to May following the mild Arizona winter and spring, Turf Paradise will see the most business possible with the majority of its residents still in the area.

"We were thinking, 'Hey if it doesn't reopen we might have to take a ride down to New Mexico to see another horse racing track over there,'" said Cruz Sagasta, a horse racing fan who has followed the sport for over 25 years.

The track has seen many come in and out of its doors and borne witness to the exploding growth of Maricopa County. Over the years, it has become a staple of the Valley, and if everything goes as planned for ownership, it will remain one.

"All of this is good and healthy for a state that's trying to find its place in the sports world," Francia said. "No one's ever starved at a racetrack. We take care of our own ... That's part of the family side of racing."