

# Garnering Publicity & County Fair Promotions



**How to gain publicity and  
promote harness racing at your fair**

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# Introduction

Harness racing's roots are at the state and county fairs across the United States. Horsemen who race at county fairs tend to be a different breed than those that race solely at the pari-mutuel tracks; they feel a connection to the history of racing, which at many county fairs dates back more than 100 years. Racing on the county fair level continues to be a significant part of the harness racing industry.

The United States Trotting Association believes that fairs from coast to coast can continue to benefit greatly from the draw harness racing provides. The sport grows through the experience gained by horses, trainers and drivers in the "minor leagues." Many fans get their first taste of harness racing at a county fair. Getting crowds to fill the grandstand was once as easy as simply unlocking the gates. Today there is so much competition for a person's time and dollars that you have to go out and find your fans. Harness racing is currently held at over 220 racing venues across the nation.

Having the right promotions plan and the right tools to accomplish that plan is of great importance to ensure success at your county fair. This guide is meant to help the Speed and Publicity offices work together with the local horsemen to promote the racing at their facility.

Racing offers a means to connect with your community that no other grandstand attraction provides. Owners, trainers, breeders and drivers are year-round members of your community. Whether or not your fairgrounds has year-round training, those involved with the sport should be readily accessible to you and to the press when you need them. Many are professionals outside the sport of racing and cooperate readily because they know the value of good press and public relations exposure in their own businesses. Having members of the racing community nearby also pays dividends when you are looking to form a publicity committee!

Increased press coverage, community involvement and the potential increase in attendance can come at a price – hard work. The rewards however can be many – increased program sales, concessions and if your fair has it, pari-mutuel wagering. You may even boost participation in the sport - a new owner, a teenager that wants to try driving or a volunteer to help with grandstand promotions.



*Harness Racing in Illinois  
Photo by: Rick Tittler*

# Horsemen and Fairs Working Together

A key to developing interest in harness racing is the ability to work with other departments at the fair and in the community. If the fair has a publicist or publicity committee, local horsemen should offer their assistance and expertise to complement and strengthen the team. It is important that plans to publicize the harness racing events are made in harmony with the plans already set to publicize the entire fair.

## ***Designate a Horsemen's Liaison***

Make sure the lines of communication are open between the fair board and the local horsemen. Appoint a horsemen's liaison to attend pertinent fair board meetings and be the one person horsemen and the fair can turn to when potential problems arise. It is important for horsemen to stay up-to-date on plans being made for the entire fair and activities planned during the off season. Horsemen want the entire fair board to understand what they are willing to do to promote racing and prove that it is a viable grandstand activity for the fair.

## ***Cross Promote with your Fair***

Be ready to put aside pride of authorship for a well-coordinated plan. Many of the things you'll be doing to get good press will serve all areas of the fair. Don't be surprised if a writer or broadcaster comes back to you to ask about something other than racing. By the same token, make sure other fair departments know how to contact you so that if a writer or broadcaster asks them about the harness racing events, they can be directed to you!

From within the racing department and local horsemen, there should be individuals who can share the responsibility of writing releases, providing a computer, digging up feature story angles, etc. To effectively promote a racing event, everyone needs to work together, one person cannot do it alone!



*Vinyl banners are weather-resistant, can be printed cheaply, posted on the fairgrounds fence or in town. The USTA has templates available and can assist with ordering or customizing a design for your fair!*

# Make the Press Feel Welcome

## ***Create a Media List***

A basic tool of PR work is a media list, comprised of newspapers, TV stations, radio stations and internet websites that cover your county. Your media list needs to be compiled many months before your fair and updated every year. Nothing is more embarrassing than sending a release to someone who's dead or dismissed! Visit a few newsstands and get a copy of all the local papers, including weeklies and the free shopper papers. Your local library would also be a good tool to use to find outlets that cover your area.

If there is a local pari-mutuel track in your area, call someone in charge of publicity and ask if they'll share a copy of their media list with you. Having a working relationship with the nearest pari-mutuel track will help you in other ways, like when you're looking for horses to race at your fair and want to cross promote to their fans and handicappers.

The USTA can help you search for local media and retrieve their contact information within a certain radius of your zip code. This is especially helpful for a state horsemen's association or colt circuit that works with various fairs.

## ***Making Contact***

In publicizing racing at your fair, it is important to embrace the press. Get to know the local sports editors for TV, radio and newspapers. Know their papers, their programs, what kind of stories and photos they carry and who writes them. Call long before your fair starts and introduce yourself. With most traditional media also having an online edition or presence, there are more opportunities to publicize your event and get coverage.

Educating the press about harness racing is more important than ever. In the past, many writers and editors knew someone that was involved in the sport and they had some basic understanding of racing. But today you need to explain what racing is and that you can't just "start your engines" and race; a 2:00 race represents years of work in raising and training the animal, and many people, from the breeder, owner, trainer, caretaker and driver to the support team (farrier, veterinarian, feed supplier, etc). Horse racing is a vital part of the agricultural industry.

## ***Take the Press to Lunch / A Day at the Races***

Make time to take an editor out to a "no strings attached" lunch, just to get to know each other. Don't press him or her for more coverage and don't push any hard issues. You might want to use this chance to give them some stock photos or to invite them out for a local farm visit. If the editor has children or grandchildren, it is especially effective to invite the family to visit a local breeding farm in the spring when there are foals to watch and pet. A trip to a farm in the spring may be one of the strongest tools you have to win over an editor to the importance and relevance of harness racing in your area.

Media members of your choosing should have free admission passes (or prepaid passes from your local horsemen's group) for themselves and their families on race day(s). If there is separate admission needed for the grandstand, provide that as well. Make sure to provide starting gate rides, access for interviews with the appropriate fair board member and horsemen and that they bring the family to the backside after the races to get a closer look at the horses.

## ***Get the Media Involved***

The experience of putting the editor, one of their reporters or photographers behind a horse is invaluable. When the fair is about four to six weeks away, offer them the opportunity to get behind a horse. If possible have them meet or sit behind a horse that will race at the fair. A "day in the life" of the horse would be a unique opportunity to give readers insight to how a horse gets ready for racing at the fair.

## ***What the Media Needs***

If a news outlet does not get news on the day it happened, in time to meet their deadline, you won't get

published because two days later it is no longer news. Even weekly newspapers in rural communities have deadlines. Know an outlet's deadlines and adhere to them. If the races are over at 4 p.m., your story should be finished at 5 p.m. and in the hands of local media five minutes after that. Faxing a story is just about the same as not writing it at all. Odds are 100-1 against an editor re-typing the story, so don't do it.

### ***Utilize Photography***

Photos are an exciting and integral part of getting news printed or posted online. Make sure you either provide them or allow the media's own photographer to get unique, exciting photos. Giving them the chance to shoot from the starting car, on the roof of the grandstand or on the backside to get shots of horses getting ready, bathed and cooled out by 8-year-old kids, will truly make their story unique.

### ***Radio / TV***

Radio stations broadcast every minute of the day and night, so they need and use a large number of stories. TV has less time, but harness racing is a sport with great visuals. Much of what a photographer would want to shoot also appeals to a videographer.

### ***Accuracy is Important***

All news outlets expect that the information they receive is accurate and it's your responsibility to make sure it is. You need to be sure about facts, dates, times, the spelling of names, ages, towns, etc. You lose a great deal of credibility if trainer Joe Jones calls the editor to complain that his horse that won the feature is six, not seven-years-old and it was not Joe Jones, Jr.'s second win of the day, it was his third! That editor will be much less likely to accept news from you in the future because, in their eyes, you've made them look bad and can't be trusted to get your facts straight.



*Each year the USTA offers a t-shirt bulk buying program. The backs of the shirts all have the county fair harness racing logo and the front changes each year. Consider ordering some for your fair as a fundraiser or give-a-way.*

# Promotional Ideas

Here are a few ideas to help you get started promoting the races. Remember, promotions is not a one-man show, you really do need a committee, even if it's only two or three people.

**County Fair Harness Racing Logo:** The USTA has created a county fair harness racing logo that any fair, colt circuit, horsemen's association or individual may use to help promote harness racing. Advertisements are also available to promote the logo, it's slogan "Where It All Begins" and participation in county fair harness racing.

**Race Sponsorships:** Sell a race for \$110 to \$150 and in return, a business or family receives passes to the fair, the race named for them in the program and the opportunity to present the race trophy (blanket, chair, plaque, etc.). Provide your sponsor with signs or flyers to hang in their business or give out to promote that they are participating in the racing program. You can also hang signs around the track for higher level sponsors.

**Race for Charity:** In-between or after the races, have a race with people pulling jog carts down the stretch. You could also use calm racehorses or ex-racehorses with double-seated jog carts that a "celebrity" and horseman can sit in together to race. Each person in the cart should designate a charity they are racing for.

**Door Prizes:** Have a designated volunteer(s) head up grandstand promotions. Offer periodic drawings throughout the card for donated gift cards from local businesses, rides in the starting gate or a \$5 betting voucher if you have wagering. Then you can use these entry blanks as your mailing list to promote the races next year! Be sure to get email addresses, no postage required.

**Pick-A-Winner:** For those fairs that do not have wagering, Pick-A-Winner has been a great incentive to get people involved in the races. Sheets are provided (USTA has a template) in the program and fans select the horse they think will win. Get the children of your local horsemen to run up and down the grandstand with five gallon ice cream buckets to pick up tickets. After the race is "official", a winning ticket is drawn and the winner receives \$5.

**Parades:** Join in your local 4th of July parade and toss out fair admission passes with candy. Have a quiet ex-racehorse or pony dressed up as a racehorse to walk in the parade. Kids can carry a banner reminding folks that harness racing is at the fair August 2, 3 and 4.

**Dollar Days:** Especially workable if you are hosting a race meet outside of the fair dates. Dollar programs, hot dogs and drinks are an easy way to not only keep the public around when they're hungry but could help raise funds for your matinee club.

**T-Shirt Toss:** After each race have the winning driver throw a couple t-shirts into the grandstand. Or if you have a "half time" or break for warm-ups, have some drivers/trainers come down and do a toss (use a t-shirt launcher to get the far ends or up top).



*A volunteer in Wisconsin holds up one of their fundraising shirts.  
Photo Courtesy: WHHA*

# Writing a Press Release

Press releases and stories can fall under two major categories: race releases and features. Those surrounding the racing program itself focus on who will win the big race, who actually won the big race and/or highlight locally-owned horses competing at the fair. An advance story previews a race; a result story tells who won and other details of the race.

The other type, a true feature, can be written at any point during the year but especially plays well in the weeks leading up to the fair. A feature is of equal value to the fair and the sport no matter when it appears in the media.

## ***Important Parts of a Press Release***

Headers must include:

Publish date (usually appears as "For Immediate Release")

Headline

Footers must include the contact info "for further information (FFI)":

FFI or Photos:

Contact person

Contact Organization

Phone (ideally a cell phone with someone available to answer 24 hours/day)

Race Day Phone

E-mail address

The very first sentence, known as the lead, should pretty much tell the most important part of the story. Explain the five most important questions in journalism: who, what, where, when and why. A strong lead also needs to catch the attention of the reader, don't let it be bland.

**Family Farm Day**

**Steiner Stock Farm**  
**2050 Bellefontaine Rd in Lima**

**Saturday 1-4pm**

*Is there a farm near your fairgrounds?  
Host an open house so the community can visit the mares & foals before race day.*



## ***Example Press Release***

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

#### **Horse Around at Steiner Stock Farm on August 15**

**Columbus, OH, July 15, 2009** – Steiner Stock Farm, the oldest Standardbred horse breeding facility in Ohio, is hosting an open house from 1:00 p.m. until 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 15th. Visitors will be able to see mares and their young foals (baby horses), brush and take photos with horses and learn how horses are raised and trained for their careers in Standardbred harness racing.

Attendees may enter to win free admission to the Allen County Fair, t-shirts or key chains and enjoy refreshments. The staff of Steiner Stock Farm and the United States Trotting Association will be on hand to answer questions about horse care, racing and breeding horses.

The open house is being held as a preview of the harness racing that will be held at the Allen County Fair in Lima on August 27 and 28. Horses racing at the county fairs have been bred by Steiner Stock Farm or have siblings currently residing at the farm.

Steiner Stock Farm is located just across from Sam's Club in Lima at 1175 Greely Chapel Rd. For more information on the Steiner Stock Farm Open House, contact Jessica Schroeder at (614) 224-2291 x3212 or [jessica.schroeder@ustrotting.com](mailto:jessica.schroeder@ustrotting.com).

**ABOUT STEINER STOCK FARM** – The Steiner family began raising Standardbreds in 1885 and moved the farm to its current location in 1904. The farm sits on 200 acres and currently has 50 broodmares. The farm supervises the birth of and raises the foals, then they are sold at various sales in and around Ohio at 18 months of age.

**ABOUT UNITED STATES TROTTING ASSOCIATION** - Since 1939 the USTA has served as the breed registry for the Standardbred horse and the record keeping entity for harness racing. Today the Association works with the 263 pari-mutuel, county fair and farm tracks that host harness racing in 24 states across the country.

#### **FFI or Photos:**

Jessica Schroeder  
U.S. Trotting Association  
(614) 224-2291 x3212 office  
(608) 772-5600 cell phone  
[jessica.schroeder@ustrotting.com](mailto:jessica.schroeder@ustrotting.com)

# Feature Stories

While entries and results are the nuts and bolts information of the sport, feature stories are extremely important. They give the public detailed information on not only the races themselves, but gives them a rooting interest when they attend the races. Pre-race stories can be about the featured race on a given day, individual horses in a race or horses that are locally owned. Post-race stories would report on what happened on race day.

What makes a good story? Stan Bergstein gave a good example, "When I was publicity director at a Midwest track many years ago, I went to the backstretch, which is where you find 99 percent of the good stories in racing. I talked to the trainer of the horse winning the invitational to see if there might be a story about the horse.

"Anything unusual about this horse – do you train him any special way?"

"No, I train him the same as every other horse in my barn," said the trainer.

"How about tricks, does the horse do a trick, have a special toy to play with?"

"No, he just stands in his stall," said the trainer.

"Ok then, how about his diet, does he like strange foods like cookies, grape soda?"

"No, just hay and oats," said the trainer. "If you really want to know about this horse, you'll have to talk to my 90-year-old grandmother. She takes care of him."

Now THAT'S a good feature story!

The first choice in getting a feature story placed is to get the news outlet to write it themselves. If that doesn't work, then write the story yourself and send it to them. Either way, you need to uncover the story, get the details and figure out where to pitch it. If a news outlet is interested in pursuing a story, they will still ask you for background material, so be prepared to write a short synopsis or release. You almost certainly will not find a good feature story in the office. You have to get out and talk to horsemen, grooms, officials, owners to find them.

**Names:** Look through the names of the horses training at your fairgrounds. A few of them probably stick out and may reveal something about the horse or the owner. When asked how trotting filly Ate the Towel got her name, her owner revealed that as a yearling she'd got very sick and no one knew why until they X-rayed her and found a towel. Despite major surgery to remove the towel, she recovered and made almost \$200,000 in the mid-90s. Multi-million dollar winner Riyadh was born during the Gulf War and named by his owner, a MASH surgeon in the Korean War, after one of the towns where the war was fought.

**Long Layoff:** A horse that is returning to the races from a layoff of a year or more may have a story to tell. The top trotter B Cor Pete spent more than a year as a buggy horse with an Amish family before returning to the races and went on to make nearly \$900,000.

**Win Streak:** A horse that has a five or six race win streak is one that you should find out more about. An older pacer put together a seven race win streak when his trainer stopped training him; opting to swim the horse in a lake on his farm instead.

**Anniversaries & Records:** The fastest, the biggest, the strongest, the best. If it's the 50th, 40th or even the 25th year of racing at your fair, you probably have an angle. Can you find some folks that raced at your fair 50 years ago? How about the fans? Don't forget to keep your own records so you know who the winningest trainer, driver and owner are at your fair. You also need to know what your record handles, attendance, etc are.

**Community Leaders:** Does the principal of your high school train a few horses on the side? How about the manager of the local grocery store? Are there folks that own or train horses and are also prominent in your community, the "hidden" side of their life may be of interest to your local media.

## TV Tips

With the advent of YouTube and the Internet, you no longer have to rely on your local television station to come out and do a live interview. If you need inspiration, look at what the Post Time Show and Pennsylvania Sire Stakes have posted. Both have incredible Internet presence to help spread the word about harness racing. It costs nothing to set up a YouTube or Facebook account – go viral!

Here are some tips of the trade, whether you are interviewed by your local station or conducting your own interview for the internet:

- Have the interviewee look at the interviewer during the Q&A. No need to look directly at the camera.
- Drivers and trainers should take off their helmet and glasses.
- Think about your audience. There are many terms in harness racing that a casual fan will have no clue about. You want to use the terminology of the trade, but either explain what the word might mean or use the horse or a race replay to show on camera what you are talking about.
- Don't ever give the impression that participants aren't out there to win. Especially when there is wagering on the line, never say, "I was only trying to make the final." The people who bet on you expect you to try to win. Even if there is an incredible favorite that has a 15 race win streak on the line, it is harness racing and an incredible amount of racing success comes from good luck.
- If the interviewer asks a vague question, don't respond with a vague answer! Don't be afraid to elaborate, it may help them with a follow-up question.
- Show emotion! This is a sport with winners and losers; owners, trainers and drivers should be happy, ecstatic, excited that their horse just won.
- Wait to walk away from the interviewer until they have panned back to him or turned the camera off. If there is a pressing need to leave a live interview, do not walk between the interviewee and the camera.
- Having a live horse at an interview gives it more depth – but make sure he is clean and has a nice, neat looking halter and lead shank, but do not put the chain across his nose, use a chifney bit if you need more control.

*Getting up close with the participants is always a great draw for race-goers. Here drivers and trainers do a meet and greet, signing 4" x 6" photo cards.*



# Available Collateral Materials

The United States Trotting Association has many collateral materials available by request for fairs to educate fans on the sport of Standardbred harness racing. Most materials are available for cost of production or free with paid shipping.

Contact the USTA at (877) 800-8782 x3212 to order

## **Brochures**

"What is the USTA?": Explains the functions of the USTA

"Standardbred Style": Standardbreds are used for much more than racing!

"Grab the Lines": How to get involved in Amateur Driving Clubs

"A Winning Combination": A guide to get new owners involved in the sport

"Harness the Excitement": A fan guide to educate newcomers to the sport

## **Books**

"Standardbred Star": Children's activity book

"100 Years in Harness": Coffee table book of harness racing history and photography

## **Posters / Program Covers**

The easiest way to get posters and program covers is through the [fairs.ustrotting.com](http://fairs.ustrotting.com) website. They are in PDF file format, of which you download and type in your fair's information. They can then be printed directly or e-mailed to your print shop. Both black & white and full color versions are available.

## **Placemats**

Also available on the [fairs.ustrotting.com](http://fairs.ustrotting.com) website. Use this (or use as a guide to create your own), print and distribute for free use at coffee shops, delis, restaurants, etc to promote your fair. Printing costs are usually around \$400 for several thousand placemats.



*Photo cards can easily be created for your local driving and training stars and equine athletes. Provide a photo and the USTA can assist with type setting and logo placement. They can then easily be picked up at any local photo finishing center.*

## **Additional Resources / Industry Support**

If there is one thing harness racing offers, it is a rather large network of organizations that are ready, willing and able to offer help with publicity, promotion and anything else you might need. Here is a list of key organizations who may in turn make other suggestions on where to obtain assistance.

### **United States Trotting Association**

[www.ustrotting.com](http://www.ustrotting.com)

750 Michigan Ave  
Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: (614) 224-2291  
Fax: (614) 224-4575

Offers assistance in publicity, track membership, racing official licensing, records and statistics. Harness Racing Communications, a division of the USTA, is based out in New Jersey and available to offer assistance in writing press releases and dealing with your local media.

### **Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame**

[www.harnessmuseum.com](http://www.harnessmuseum.com)

240 Main Street  
Goshen, NY 10924

Phone: (845) 294-6330  
Fax: (845) 294-3463

Offers assistance in historical, statistical and biographical information on harness racing's past, present and future. Offers traveling exhibits that fairs and horsemen's associations can put on display.

### **Harness Horse Youth Foundation**

[www.hhyf.org](http://www.hhyf.org)

16575 Carey Road  
Westfield, IN 46074

Phone: (317) 867-5877  
Fax: (317) 867-5896

Offers assistance in one-day youth camps, produces the popular Harness Hero trading cards and organizes week-long Youth Leagues at pari-mutuel tracks across the country.

**ENJOY  
County Fair Harness Racing  
in your hometown!**

