

# NEW MEXICO RACING INDUSTRY MAKING A TURN FOR THE BETTER and BETTOR

After the dust literally settled on an extremely windy and warm Sunday evening at Sunland Park Race Track, located just a stone's throw from the famed Rosa's Cantina in the gritty West Texas town of El Paso, one could not help but be amazed for several reasons what the New Mexico racing industry had just experienced. The crowd of over 16,000 race fans had just watched locally based horse, Runaway Ghost make his run for the roses an impressive one with a sound victory in the \$800,000 Grade III Sunland Derby.

As rosy as things seemed this past Sunday, things haven't always been so rosy looking for the New Mexico horse racing industry. The industry had been ripe with cheating and the illegal doping of horses, mostly from "match racers". The breeding industry's numbers were in a decline and pari-mutuel handle had remained relatively flat for several years. Although, the final 2017 handle figures indicate that there was an increase in handle over the 2016 race season. Could the New Mexico racing industry be experiencing a turnaround?

Executive Director of the New Mexico Racing Commission, Ismael "Izzy" Trejo said, "I think it is too early to tell, but it feels like we are headed in the right direction. Our goal when I came on board with the New Mexico Racing Commission was to try and regain the betting public's trust in our racing product and that started by suspending problematic trainers and their horses. Horses that test positive for certain drugs automatically go on the stewards list for a 60 day period, meaning they are taken out of the racing population. Trejo also added," Handle had been very flat and it seemed like it was more likely to start declining than increase. We have been utilizing out of competition testing, a strong post race testing program and as of July 2017, hair testing." All three combined appear to be having positive effects on the industry. Through the testing program, and most recently, hair testing, we have stopped a good handful of quarter horses that have more than likely been abusing clenbuterol from running in big money races. Several owners, breeders, trainers and track managements have thanked us for leveling the playing field and building confidence in the racing product. When we deny the entry of a horse that qualified for the finals of big stakes races, the honest people have an increased opportunity to win some money and that includes the bettors. We feel that will stimulate handle, providing a good, honest, quality product and the Sunland Derby card did just that. Our job is far from done here, but I promise that we will continue to utilize our resources in the best way we think possible in order to help our industry grow."

As Trejo mentioned and handle numbers indicate, horse players supported the March 25 Sunland Derby card more than any other race card in the history of New Mexico racing. Bettors from New Mexico and all parts of the globe produced a handle of \$4.2 million, the most ever bet on one card in New Mexico. The Sunland Derby itself handled \$1.8 million, smashing yet another record for money wagered on a single race in New Mexico.

Dustin Dix, longtime Director of Racing for Sunland Park and a University of Arizona Race Track Industry Program graduate said, "The \$4 million handle has been a goal of Sunland Park for the last few years. I feel that the depth and quality of the Derby, field size, and a strong undercard helped in reaching and exceeding management's handle expectations. The strong support from the horsemen and race fans will help us in continuing to strive to expand the Sunland Derby weekend experience".

With a significant decrease in drug positives over the last two years and an uptick in handle throughout the state's five race tracks, one can't help but feel that things are taking a turn for the better in the Land of Enchantment.