

Will lust for poker bring back quarter-horse races in Florida?

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April 28, 2008

Gambling proponents think they have a great way to tap poker's popularity in Florida: Bring back quarter-horse racing by building tracks that also include card rooms.

Each horse race might last only 20 seconds or so, and if you wanted to bet on a race, that'd be fine. But if you wanted to stick around the card room and up the ante, that'd be fine too.

Quarter horses haven't run in Florida since the 1990s, even though longer thoroughbred races have continued.

Plans for eight quarter-horse tracks -- four of them in Central Florida -- are in the works. But it's not a done deal yet. Here are the stakeholders:

High rollers

Racing and casino interests want tracks in DeBary, Melbourne and Ocala, and in Sumter, Gadsden and Citrus counties. They've also stacked their chips on Jefferson and Hamilton counties.

Potential track owners

State legislators suggested restricting quarter-horse racing, spurring potential track owners to move quickly. Even more applications could materialize if Tallahassee

lawmakers do not pass restrictions.

Racers

Marcus "Junior" Strickland of Flagler County and other quarter-horse owners won't have to cart their animals out of state for competitions if races return to Florida. Advocates say each horse in training could bring up to seven jobs to Florida.

The skeptics

Some counties might embrace these tracks. But others won't. In DeBary, residents won't just say no, they'll say "Heck, no!" says City Council member Jack Lenzen. Sumter County sees a possible economic boon from the tracks, but residents have to sign off.

Support groups

More gambling means more addicts, said Pat Fowler, executive director of the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling.

Dog clubs

Hold your horses but not your hounds, says the Daytona Beach Kennel Club, where card rooms are already active. Its parent company is suing the state to prevent a DeBary quarter-horse race track.

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