

## TOM TUCKER: Businessman and Racetracker

Tom Tucker passed away a little over a year ago. He was a husband, a father, and a contributor to Quarter Horse history in the state of Illinois. Tom and I were at different times, friends, competitors, promoters, and horsemen. The many facets of our unique relationship, placed me in a position to know Tom well.



Tom and his wife Cindy started and constructed the non-parimutuel AQHA racetrack Pit Run Park near Gibson City, in East-central Illinois. It was a family operation, with Tom serving as owner and racing secretary, Cindy as office secretary, and daughter Emily as the jockey "go-fer" on race day. The track operated from 1982 'til 1993, hosting almost 4,000 races for American Quarter Horses, and paying purse money of nearly \$8,000,000. Horses from more than 20 states and Canada started on the track, and Pit Run saw three \$100,000 races leave the gates. Countless fans of the American Quarter Horse were initiated and developed at the track and Pit Run was the sole light in the Midwest during at least one season when there was no Quarter Horse racing other than Pit Run and the two weekends of the Quarter Horse Congress (during the 1983 season, there was no active track in Michigan, and the Kentucky and Iowa tracks had not yet begun to race.). That was an especially busy year for Pit Run, as we saw a great influx of Michigan and Canadian horses and trainers, prompting the track to run as many as twenty races a day on Sundays from the first weekend in May, 'til the last weekend of October. Tom and Cindy ran a safe and honest track, and looking back, I feel that these goals were more important to Tom than mere profit. I still remember when Arlington Park installed a newly marketed Safety Rail, Tom called the company marketing that rail and had Pit Run's installed within a month of the Arlington installation. He said, "I couldn't live in good conscience, if one of my riders was crippled or killed at Pit Run, and I hadn't done everything I could to keep them safe in their dangerous occupation."



Pit Run began in Tom's dreams as he raced American Quarter Horses as an owner at the Illinois and Indiana State Fairs and at Oklahoma's Blue Ribbon Downs. He stood the Top Moon son, Mr. Top Bug who traced to the great FL Ladybug on the tail female line. While racing with Oklahoma trainer Calvin Teague, Tom played with the daydream of a central Illinois Quarter Horse track that could be depended on to race for more than just the odd weekend. The U.S. economy came into play, as it entered a recession causing a drop in the business at both the gravel pit and Case farm equipment dealership run by the Tuckers. As Tom related in an interview for our tabloid THE SPRINTER, "We weren't making any money in 1980, and I was going to have to lay-off employees of both businesses. At about that time, Case informed me of a heavy equipment lease program they were going to initiate for dealers, and I also looked at my typical poor crop that was growing on the high lime content gravel pit land. I thought that the stars had conspired, and that if we were ever going to build a racetrack, this would be the year to start! I could use land that didn't raise much of a crop, lease heavy equipment on a special arrangement from Case, utilize workers that I would otherwise lay-off, and with the help of the Illinois Quarter Horse Racing Association membership, get the track built." Tom approached the IQHRA and began a series of workdays using it's members to help with the construction, painting, and clean-up. And when the track was complete, Tom and Cindy named it Pit Run Park, after a grade of gravel from the pits that gave it birth.

When first approached, AQHA was skeptical that a single family could build a racetrack to the demanding AQHA nonparimutuel specifications. However, as Racing Director Dan Fick came to know Tom, he saw that the "business mind and his character" would be assets to AQHA activities in a Midwest where opportunities for Quarter Horse racing were dwindling. Fick became a close friend and strong supporter of the Tuckers and shared in their enthusiasm for the project. Both powerful men saw that Pit Run could allow the owner to assess his race horse in varying levels of competition, before moving on to the pari-mutuel tracks around the country.

I served as IQHRA President for seven of the Pit Run years, and saw the way Tom "lived his dream". He studied condition books from both Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse tracks, and used insights from them to write his own conditions. He tried to care for his family interests by making a profit when he could, and a number of times Tom and I were on the opposite sides of an issue in IQHRA Board meetings. Even when we disagreed, I knew that Tom would say what he thought, and do what he felt was best for his track and for the sport of Quarter Horse Racing in the Midwest. When he became angry about something, his eyes would focus into lasers, and his lips would firm. At that point, a person knew they were in for a battle with this little, red-headed horseman. One day I saw Tom stare down a suspended leading trainer who was almost twice his size, while crisply saying as he pointed, "If you don't like what I'm doing, there's the door!"

Tom gave Quarter-racers a life for 10 seasons, that horsemen will never again have the opportunity to experience. Pit Run had all the airs of a small town- safe...no crime, no worries about purse money, and good people to socialize with every weekend during the season, combined with the pure adrenaline of good horses, and unique personalities such as trainer Andy Brown (the last NHL goalee to play without a face mask); Sonny Armstrong (the Pacific Wars marine veteran who was one of the top contest riders and trainers in Illinois in the decades before Pit Run, and was usually making some "friendly book" on the rail each and every race day); Pit Run outrider Sonny Dodd who would send his gelding hell-for-leather down the track after a loose horse, making a one-handed pickup of the flying rein that would rival any stunt man of the "B" movies in the Thirties(Sonny became President of the IQHRA toward the end of the Pit Run period, and almost single-handedly kept the organization going over the following years); Deb Schneider (a girl jockey who could and would trade insults and punches with the guys when things got hairy- she was also the runner-up U.S. Champion ladies arm-wrestler for 1982, and cleaned-up pretty well too); Duane Swingley, starter extraordinaire; Harley Greene- AQHA identifier, always with a story; "Gentleman Carter Riley- Leading Jockey who is still riding Stakes Winners in Indiana in his sixties; Lisa Dillon- a pretty blonde trainer who used TENS machines, acupuncture and other approaches before they were fashionable, and was perennially near the top of the Leading Trainers Lists; and more, and more, and more.

A couple stories to demonstrate the wisdom and sense of humor shown by Tom in his role of track manager include the low-budget owner who came-up with a good runner, yet had been ruled off track grounds by AQHA. Tom could empathize with this fella's one good horse and his need to see it race. Tom told him to have a friend drive him into the barn area in the bed of a truck with a ladder in it. Tucker then allowed him to watch his horse run in the finals, midway up the ladder, propped against the end of one of the barns on the backside. The owner never set foot on the grounds of Pit Run.

In another instant, the Stewards were called to the Jockey's Quarters on race day. There was a question regarding a Jockey that had been fined for an infraction by AQHA at another track, not yet paid the fine, and had slipped into Pit Run to ride under an alias. When challenged by Tom and the stewards, he maintained that he wasn't "that guy", but rather was his twin brother, Bill. When he was forced to produce ID, the scam was up, and Tucker escorted this hard-luck rider off the grounds. The rider later told us that Tucker had then loaned him \$50 so he could get back to his home in Kentucky. This jockey returned to ride at Pit Run repeatedly, once he was again in the good graces of the AQHA.

Pit Run, according to my research, was the only other Quarter Horse track besides Los Alamitos, to be constructed, owned, and operated by only one family. Trust me, Tom Tucker will be good company for Frank Vessels in the afterlife!

Ground was broken by Pit Run and Tom Tucker in many areas:

Jockey Club Hall of Fame Rider John Rotz was a guest Paddock Judge at Pit Run.

The IQHRA held the first Legislator's Breakfast and Legislator's Day at Pit Run, which became an annual affair.

The first sanctioned Paint races run in Illinois were held at Pit Run.

The first buffalo race in Illinois was at Pit Run.

The first syndication of a Quarter Race Horse to community businesses was accomplished by Pit Run and the IQHRA.

Pit Run leased the track to Lisa and I for the Annual American Heritage Speed Sales. The 1983 sale saw 330 head of race-bred American Quarter Horses go under the gavel in one day's time- the largest one-day Quarter Horse sale in Illinois history. That sale averaged more than \$1,400 per head, with a sale topper of \$13,000.

Pit Run and the Illinois Quarter Racing Association joined forces to become politically active in Springfield, attending the Agriculture breakfast each year, and lobbying with Congressional leaders for the best interests of ALL American Quarter Horse owners in Illinois.

Pit Run and the IQHRA broke ground in presenting an application for promotional funding to the Illinois Department of Tourism.

Tom Tucker was more than a businessman. He loved his animals, especially the fast Quarter Horses. He loved his family. He loved antique Colt pistols and old cowboy movies. And he loved horsemen. He kept Quarter Horse racing alive in the Midwest during some very dark days, and gave everyone who ever visited Pit Run Park an experience that we will never see the likes of, again!