Running Aces
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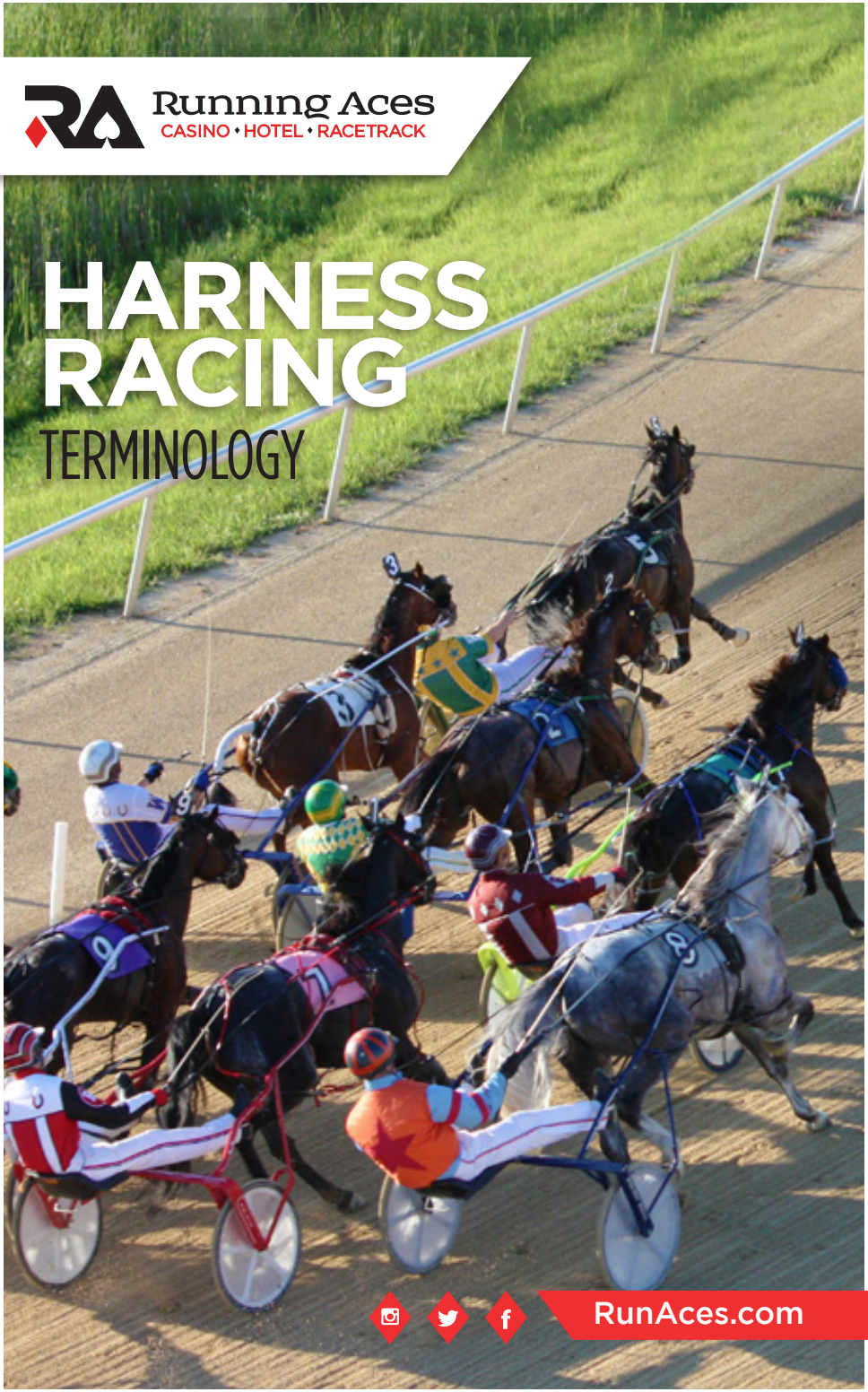
HARNESS RACING
TERMINOLOGY



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HARNESS RACING GENERAL TERMS

BOXED IN: A horse that is racing on the rails (or fence) and is surrounded by other horses in front, outside and behind it. A horse that is boxed in is held up and unable to gain a clear passage.

BREAK: To start galloping and lose natural trotting or pacing rhythm. It occurs more often with trotters than pacers.

BROODMARE: A female horse, generally retired from racing, used for breeding purposes.

CARD: Another term for race program. For example, a person may refer to there being eight races on the card, which simply means eight races will be staged on that particular day.

CATCH-DRIVER: A driver which doesn't train his or her own horses, and is engaged by other trainers and owners to drive their horses.

CLAIMING RACE: A race where any of the entrants may be claimed (purchased) for a specified amount.

CLASS: The category of racing in which a horse competes, such as a claimer, conditioned event, stake race, etc.

COLORS: The special colorful jacket worn by drivers when in a race. Unlike Thoroughbred racing, drivers register their own colors and wear them every time they race.

COLT: A male horse three years of age of less.

CONDITIONED RACE: A race where eligibility is based on age, sex, money won, or races won. For example, "three year-old fillies, non-winners of $10,000 or four races."

COVER: A horse that races with another horse in front of him is said to race with cover, as the leading horse cuts the wind resistance.

CROSS FIRE: When a horse's hind foot strikes the opposite front foot or leg.

DAM: The female parent, or mother, of a horse.

DEAD HEAT: A situation in which the judges, using a photograph, cannot separate two or more horses when judging the outcome of the race.

DISTANCED: A horse that is out of touch with the rest of the field at the end of the race. This is often referred to as finished distanced.

DRIVER: The person holding a license or permit to drive harness horses. There are different types of licenses, which correspond to differing levels of experience.

EARLY/LATE CLOSER: A race requiring payments which start much closer to the actual race date than a stake. "Early" and "Late" involve specified periods of time.

FILLY: A female horse three years of age or less.

FIRST-OVER: The first horse to make a move on the leader in a race moving up on the outside.

FOAL: A newly born horse. Also describes the act of a mare giving birth.

FREE-LEGGED: A pacer which races without wearing hobbies.

GELDING: A castrated male horse of any age.

HANDICAPPING: The first step in successfully picking a winner (or "handicapping") is becoming familiar with reading the racing program. Each program has a section explaining the information format used at the particular track. Probably the best place to start when handicapping Standardbreds is time. Since over 99 percent of all harness races are conducted at the one mile distance, valid comparisons can be made among horses.

HARNESS: The gear which is used to attach the sulky to a horse, to carry the hobbles and to enable the driver to steer the horse.

HOME STRETCH: The straight length of the track, nearest the spectators, where the finish line is situated. It is called this because it is the final part of the track a horse travels down during a race on its run 'home' or to the finish line.

HOBBLES: The straps which connect the front and rear legs on the same side of a horse. Most pacers wear hobbles to help balance their stride and maintain a pacing gait. The length of hobbles is adjustable, and a trainer registers the length that best suits his or her horse. There are also trotting hobbles that work through a pulley system to help trotters maintain their gait.

HORSE: A male four years of age or older.

INQUIRY: Stewards may conduct an inquiry as a result of any incident which may have occurred during a race, to determine whether or not certain drivers and/or horses were responsible for the incident whether they should receive due punishment.

JAN. 1: All Standardbreds share this date as their birthday.

JOG CART: A cart that is attached to the harness and carries the trainer, and which the horse pulls. Used when horses are training or warming up for a race. It is larger, longer and heavier than a SULKY.

INVITATIONAL: A race for the top horses in the area. Also known as an Open or Free-For-All.

LAME: The term used to describe a horse which is limping or has difficulty walking properly.

LEASING: As opposed to buying a harness horse, people have the option of leasing one. Just like some people lease a car instead of paying the money up-front, leasing a horse gives people use of a horse without large capital outlay. An agreement or contract must be drawn up between the two parties, and the lease must be registered with the relevant controlling body.

MAIDEN: A horse which has not yet won a race.

MARE: A female four years of age or more.

PARI-MUTUEL RACE: A race in which wagering is allowed, held at a track licensed by a state's racing commission. Pari-mutuel races are held at licensed pari-mutuel racetracks or fairs.

PARKED: A horse racing on the outside, with at least one horse between it and the inside rail.

PHOTO FINISH: When two horses cross the finish too closely to identify a winner, officials call for a photograph of the race, taken exactly at the finish line, to help them determine who was ahead.

POCKET: A horse in a pocket is unable to obtain a clear run because it has other horses situated in front, behind and to the side of it.

POST POSITION: Generally, the closer a horse starts to the inside rail or barrier of the track (especially on smaller tracks), the better is its chance of winning. At the start, horses must either "leave" (start quickly) to get a good position, or else find a place on the rail to avoid racing on the outside the horses. When racing on the outside the horse is said to be "parked out," and loses ground on every turn. A horse on the inside has a better chance to get to the rail quickly get a good position.

QUALIFIER: A race in which a horse must go a mile below an established time standard to prove itself capable of competing in pari-mutuel races.

SCRATCH: A horse that is withdrawn (or scratched) from a race before the start.

SIRE: The male parent, or father, of a horse.

SIRE STAKE: Stake races designed to promote Standardbred breeding and racing within a state. Different states have different rules regulating eligibility to that state's sire stakes program. Rules include: a horse must be the offspring of a stallion standing in the state or a mare living in the state, owned by a resident of that state or the horse was born in that state.

STAKE RACE: A race where owners make a series of payments, starting well in advance, to keep a horse eligible. If an owner misses a payment to a stakes race, the horse becomes ineligible.

STARTER: The person responsible for starting a harness race. The starter controls the start of the race from the back of the mobile vehicle.

SULKY: Also known as the racebike, the sulky is attached to the harness, pulled by the horse, and carries the driver. It is lighter and more streamlined than a job cart.

THREE-WIDE: When a horse is two horses out from the rail.

TIME TRIAL: An attempt to have a horse beat its own best time in a non-competitive event. A time trial is not a race. Galloping horse hitched to sulkies, called prompters, are used to push a horse to its best effort.

TOTE BOARD: An electronic board, usually in the infield of a track, which posts the odds, amount of money bet, results of a race and the wagering pay-offs.

WEANLING: A baby horse, up to its first birthday.

YEARLING: Any horse between its first and second birthday.

THE STANDARDBRED HORSE

The horses used in harness racing are Standardbreds, and only a registered Standardbred may compete in a sanctioned harness race.

The origins of the Standardbred trace back to Messenger, an English Thoroughbred foaled in 1780, and later exported to the United States. Messenger was the great-grand sire of Hambletonian 10, to whom every Standardbred can trace its heritage. Standardbreds are a relatively new breed, dating back just over 200 years, but it is a true American breed.

The name "Standardbred" originated because the early trotters (pacers would not come into the picture until much later) were required to reach a certain standard for the mile distance in order to be registered as part of the new breed. The mile is still the standard distance covered in nearly every harness race.

While Thoroughbred racing has long been known as the sport of kings, the dependable, athletic Standardbred brought racing to the common man, first between neighbors on community roads, and later in state-of-the-art racetracks.

Standardbred racing is as much part of our American landscape as cowboys and apple pie. As it evolved it gave the United States some of its first "sports heroes," including the great Dan Patch, the legendary Adios and the great grey ghost, Greyhound. In many respects, the Standardbred resembles the Thoroughbred. However, it is often more muscled and longer in body, and does not stand as tall, averaging between 15 and 16 hands. The head is bigger and may even sport a Roman nose. This breed appears in varying colors, although bay and brown are predominant. It weighs between 800 and 1,000 pounds. Standardbreds are known for their docile personalities and willing temperaments.

GAITS

Standardbred racing is contested on two gaits, the trot and the pace. Trotters move with a diagonal gait; the left front and right rear legs move in unison, as do the right front and left rear. It requires much skill by the trainer to get a trotter to move perfectly at high speeds, even though the trotting gait is a natural one in the animal world. Pacers, on the other hand, move the legs on one side of their body in tandem: left front and rear, and right front and rear. This action shows why pacers are often called "sidewheelers." Pacers, account for about 80 percent of the performers in harness racing. They are the faster of the two gaits, and are aided in maintaining their gait by plastic loops called hobbles, which keep their legs moving in synchronization. Any trotter or pacer who "breaks" into a canter or gallop during a race must be pulled back to its correct gait and lose ground to its competitors or be disqualified from the race.

THE RACING

Most Standardbred start racing as two or three
year-olds. Trotters race only trotters and pacers race only pacers. Racing takes place at numerous tracks and fairs across North America, although harness racing is most popular in the Midwest and the East.

DRIVERS AND TRAINERS

When racing first started, most participants drove, trained and owned their horses. In the last two decades, the sport has become much more specialized, and like Thoroughbreds, harness racing now has separate drivers and trainers. Drivers who are hired on a per-race basis are known as catch-drivers. This distinguishes them from trainer-drivers who also drive their horses. Drivers and trainers each have their own "colors", a special suit in a style, pattern and color that they have approved by and registered with the USTA. These colors are individual to each racing participant. Unlike Thoroughbred racing, where jockeys wear an owner's "silks," each driver wears his or her own colors no matter by which owner or trainer he is hired.