

Berkshire Downs: Racing's Non-Success Story

The Race is Not Always To The Swift . . . blog recently related a story about the former racetrack, Berkshire Downs, which was located in the western Massachusetts town of Hancock.

<http://theraceisnottotheswift.blogspot.com/2009/06/old-blue-eyes-was-never-spotted-at.html>

Hancock is on the New York State border between the New York State line and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. As someone who lives about 40 minutes from the Berkshire Downs location, it always saddens me to drive by the Berkshire Downs site and note that there used to be a racetrack here.

The story of Berkshire Downs is one of those late 1950's early 1960's stories when people believed that operating a racetrack was synonymous with printing your own money. Opening up a racetrack was the equivalent of opening up a casino prior to 2008. You couldn't lose. The location seemed to be a good one. It's on the major US highway between Pittsfield and Albany. There was no other racetrack in western Massachusetts or in all of Western New England. There were no pari-mutuels at all in Connecticut or Vermont. It's close to the Capital District in New York which regularly supports the Saratoga thoroughbred meet. Why not run a meet just before and after the Saratoga meet? If we get the locals, the tourists in the Berkshires, and just a few of the folks from the Albany area who go to Saratoga in August, we can't go wrong.

And that's what they did. They opened up a ½ mile thoroughbred track on September 19, 1960.¹ A crowd of approximately 6,000 people was on hand.² It wasn't a fair track. It was a regularly licensed facility, and typically ran a meet of 24 programs.³ At that time Massachusetts only allowed for 90 days in total of thoroughbred racing, and the bulk of those days went to Suffolk Downs near Boston.

¹ "New Berkshires Track Opens," New York Times, September 20, 1960.

² Id.

³ See Berkshire Downs, Inc. v. State Racing Com., 350 Mass. 695, 696 (Mass. 1966).

Since it was a no-lose proposition, Berkshire Downs also likely had serious mob involvement. While ostensibly run by Rhode Island entrepreneur B.A. Dario (who also operated Lincoln Downs in Rhode Island) there was apparently significant involvement with Raymond Patriarca who was considered the longtime overall leader of the Mafia in New England.⁴ Interestingly enough also somewhat involved was Frank Sinatra who served for a time as a vice-president of the track. Singer Tony Martin was also a director of the track. Dario claimed that he had interested the two performers in a meeting in Miami in the winter of 1962.⁵

Sinatra at a Congressional investigation in 1972 claimed to have made a \$55,000 investment in Berkshire Downs in 1962 which he sold in 1963 after finding out that the without his knowledge he had been named a vice president of the track.⁶ He claimed to have bought the 5% interest in the track after the track's president Salvatore Rizzo had approached him in a nightclub in Atlantic City in August of 1962.⁷ Patriarca was alleged to have invested \$215,000 in Berkshire. He denied the investment, and further denied ever meeting Sinatra.⁸

The track did have the potential of making money, but it had two problems. Under the best of circumstances, its management had overestimated the market. It was never a license to print money. But the most significant problem was the competition. In 1963, Green Mountain Park opened in western Vermont, also near the New York border. Green Mountain was 26 miles from Berkshire Downs. Green Mountain was nicer and far larger than Berkshire.⁹ It had a 13/16th mile circumference. It could race at night. It featured both harness and thoroughbred racing. The

⁴ "Raymond Patriarca Dies At 76; Reputedly Ruled N.E. Organized Crime," Boston Globe, July 12, 1984.

⁵ "Singer-Actors Own Shares," Boxoffice, September 17, 1962.

⁶ "Reputed Mafia Chief Testifies He Never Met Sinatra," New York Times, AP, July 20, 1972.

⁷ "Sinatra Berates House Unit for Letting Felon Link Him to Mafia," New York Times, July 19, 1972.

⁸ See note 6 supra.

⁹ It was said to encompass 147 acres in 2007. See "New Property Owners Race to Develop Old Track," Berkshire Eagle, October 14, 2007.

track was built at a cost of \$6 million.¹⁰ While Pownal, Vermont, might have been a slightly less desirable location than Hancock, Massachusetts, Green Mountain had it all over Berkshire Downs in customer convenience.¹¹ After Green Mountain opened, Berkshire Downs had no shot.

The track became unsuccessful after Green Mountain opened,¹² and filed for bankruptcy in 1964.¹³ It continued to operate for the 24 days of racing (with the exception of 1966 when it lacked authorization to race) until 1968. While it may not have been making money as a racetrack, its allotment of 24 days of racing was still a valuable asset. Suffolk Downs needed the added dates if it wanted to be successful.

In June of 1969, Suffolk Downs bought out Berkshire in order to get the 24 additional dates. Suffolk Downs “purchased all of the outstanding shares of stock of Berkshire for \$550,000.”¹⁴ At about the same time, Suffolk agreed to sell the Berkshire Downs property to Martin DeMatteo, the owner of Green Mountain. That agreement contained “a restriction ‘forever prohibiting the use of the real estate for the conduct of horse racing (flat and harness) except for a six-day ‘fair racing’ meeting, so called.’”¹⁵

The sale between Suffolk and Green Mountain was eventually consummated, and, pursuant to the agreement, in the 1970’s Berkshire only saw limited use as a part of the “fair track” circuit in

¹⁰ “Lights Lure More Bettors Into Vermont Track,” New York Times, June 25, 1963.

¹¹ More than 25 years after Green Mountain had opened, the Boston Globe could still say, “Green Mountain is perhaps the prettiest setting in New England for a track, nestled in the hills and surrounded by foliage that is lush and green in the summer and a spectacular kaleidoscope in the fall. But it is also a fading beauty. Built to handle harness and thoroughbred racing, Green Mountain never quite made it. Its conversion to a dog track has kept it going, but everything is oversized in proportion to the crowds that show up Wednesday through Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons.” “Going To The Dogs; Two Sick Puppies Went To All 8 New England Tracks . . . In 34 Hours. Why? Because The Chase Is The Thing, Plus They Felt Like It,” Boston Globe, August 19, 1990.

¹² “Berkshire Cancels Meet,” New York Times, UPI, July 3, 1969.

¹³ “Raceway Adjudged Bankrupt,” New York Times, AP, January 28, 1964.

¹⁴ Massachusetts Sportservice, Inc. v. Berkshire Downs, Inc., 360 Mass. 75, 76 (Mass. 1971)

¹⁵ Id.

Massachusetts. Also in the 1970's, Green Mountain and Berkshire were sold to the Rooney family for \$8.58 million.¹⁶ Eventually Berkshire was totally disbanded. Green Mountain switched over entirely to dog racing in the 1970's and went out of the pari-mutuel business after 1992.¹⁷ The track was sold for \$250,000 in 1993,¹⁸ and subsequent efforts to bring casino gambling, pari-mutuels, or any development back to Green Mountain have been unsuccessful.¹⁹

At least when you drive by Green Mountain, you know that there was once a racetrack there. If you drive by Berkshire Downs on US Route 20, you'll find the Hancock Shaker Village, but no signs of any racetrack. In this town of 721 residents, which already has 24 cemeteries,²⁰ one racetrack has been successfully interred.

¹⁶ "Rooneys Get Two Tracks," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, AP, January 17, 1973. See also "Green Mountain Goes to Rooney," New York Times, AP, December 15, 1972. The excitement of Green Mountain was that in 1968 it became the only track authorized to have Sunday racing. "Dog Days in Vermont," New York Times, August 10, 1975.

¹⁷ "Green Mountain Dog Track to Close," Boston Globe, January 2, 1993.

¹⁸ "Vt. Track Hopes for Horse Play," Boston Globe, January 1, 1994

¹⁹ "Race Track Owners Sued," Bennington Banner, June 4, 2009.

²⁰ <http://www.berkshirelinks.com/hancock-mass.php>