



The History of Horse Racing at The Big Fresno Fair

The Early Years (1800's – early 1900's)

The first Fresno Fair opened in 1883, featuring a five-day horse race meet, some simple produce displays and a livestock exhibit. Early horse racing pitted horses of farm owners from throughout the Valley against one another; their proud owners would wager with neighbors and friends at the predominately agricultural show each fall. Modest as it was, it was a huge success, and only five years later, a grandstand was added to the fairgrounds.

The Grandstand

The first grandstand, with a separate clubhouse, was completed two weeks before the 1888 Fair opened. Since the current grandstand was built in 1938, numerous expansions have taken place. Repairs were made in 1946 after extensive damage from wartime use of the grounds by the U.S. Army. The mezzanine was enlarged in 1960, and an enclosed racing press box and three new box seat sections were completed in 1961. In 1996, the grandstand was dedicated to illustrious former Fair Board Director Brian I. Tatarian.

Set Backs & Improvements

In the early 1900s, the newly invented automobile shared race billing with horses. Around 1904, world famous driver Barney Oldfield awed automobile enthusiasts in his Peerless Green Dragon racing machine. Oldfield was the first man to drive a car at 60 mph on an oval. By 1910, the popularity of automobile racing outgrew horse racing and coupled by the legislative ban on pari-mutuel betting, horse racing was temporarily halted. To provide the Fair venue with the latest in racing facilities, a \$25,000 contract was inked with local sports hero Jack Prince of Prince Speedways Company in June 1920. He agreed to build a wooden track to accommodate motorcycle and auto racing in time for the 200 mile San Joaquin Valley Classic, scheduled for October 2, 1920.

The Fresno-Madera District Fair brought back horse racing in 1935, but the entire Fair was shut down shortly thereafter for army use during World War II. After extensive repairs, the Fair reopened again in 1948. At that time, horse racing was stronger than ever! In 1938, a reinforced concrete grandstand with 4,000 seats and a restaurant was built to replace the original Victorian-style turreted wood grandstand at the track. Improvements to the racing facility continued into the 1980s when a complete electronic system was created online to allow bettors to place bets for any race listed at a window, leading to the creation of modern day satellite wagering.

Present Day

Live Horse Racing has always been part of the tradition and excitement at The Big Fresno Fair. It has withstood 140 years of changes in history and to this day is known as one of the busiest race tracks in the State. In 2007, The Big Fresno Fair hosted its first ever mule match race and was the only California Racing Fair to be up in handle. In 2008, track improvements such as the paddock, remodeled tote board, trees and grass enhanced the look of the track. In 2010, with support of Friends of the Fair, the Luxury Deck was added to the Brian I. Tatarian Grandstand providing a bird's eye view of both the finish line and the paddock! Each year horse racing grows in popularity, and in 2021, the Fair hosted another amazing race meet – returning after going dark in 2020 due the international COVID-19 pandemic! The Big Fresno Fair continues to be one of the safest tracks with no major injuries to its equine athletes in the past seven years.