

Down The Stretch

ONE WOMAN WORKING TO KEEP MICHIGAN RACING ALIVE

Although Michigan racing has taken a big hit over the past few years, there are still dedicated horsemen who continue to race there and hold out hope that things will improve.



One of those is 31-year-old Crystal Serra (at left), who has served on the Michigan Harness Horsemen's Association's board of directors the past three years and is currently its secretary.

Earlier this year, Serra spent \$800 of her own money advertising racing at Northville Downs in the *Detroit Metro Times*, a very popular alternative newspaper that is distributed for free. More recently, she solicited \$1,500 from fellow horsemen for a 10-week advertising campaign on the *Metro Times'* website. She

recently took time from her job as a project manager for an accounting firm to talk about the current state of Michigan racing with *The Horseman's* Gordon Waterstone.

Q: Tell me about how your *Metro Times* online ad campaign came about?

A: We want to get exposure for racing and I know the *Metro Times* is a really popular alternative newspaper in the Detroit area. I initially was going to do it all myself, and then I thought I would put it out there to see if horsemen would be interested in helping the cause. I was pleasantly surprised that I got such a great response from people who were able to find the money in these tough times.

I think that horsemen have a responsibility to help promote the sport, be that through marketing efforts such as our *Metro Times* ad campaign or simply bringing groups of people to the track to show them a good time. The main drive for why I chose the *Metro Times* is that there is really no digital presence for horse racing in Michigan and they are a very popular online newspaper. The more exposure we can bring to racing that is positive, the better.

Q: You've also expanded on social media, and you participated in a July 4 parade in Northville?

A: Social media can be such a vital tool and Jessica Otten did a great job with the twitter page for Northville Downs. We also shared some pictures with the Harness Racing Fan Zone.

For the parade, we took Augies, a 13 year old owned by Jen Main, and put him in full race gear and hooked the bike up to him and he walked in the parade. Skip DeMull was in racing colors. We got 200 coloring books from the USTA and handed them out along the parade route. Northville Downs made a banner that said 'Live Racing Coming Soon,' so many people were asking us on the parade route about when did racing start back up. We were the only horse group in the parade. Heck, we won as the second most unique vehicle.

Q: Are you able to sustain racing with just Northville having live meets?

A: I think so. I haven't seen exact numbers on simulcast handle, but there is clearly a horse supply in Michigan still. There are full fields and the purse structure is around \$40,000 or \$50,000 a night. I think we will be able to sustain racing here for a couple more years for sure. Where we are 10 years from now, or five years from now, I don't know.

Q: With the added dates now at Northville Downs through November, what will the total number of dates be for the year?

A: I believe we ended up at 72, which is a far cry from 31 in 2014. Last year we had 10 days at Hazel Park, 10 at Northville and 11 at Sports Creek.

Q: With so few dates, why isn't there a mass exodus?

A: I think the horsemen here have an incredible resolve to not give in. We also have fair racing and there were overnights at the fairs, but not a lot of money. People raced their horses there or if they could get in out of state, they were shipping. But everyone's preference is to race at home where their families are.

Q: Is there still hope for racing at Jackson?

A: I'm not sure where that stands. I never raced there and only went there once or twice when I was in college. But the horsemen who have raced there tell me it was an electrifying crowd. My concern when Jackson was proposed was how much do they handle in simulcasting and how much do they bet. Ultimately, that's what makes our industry go around. Historically from the records I could pull from the Gaming Control Board, it just didn't look like they handled a lot in simulcasting. But if something could materialize where there could be a meet there and support itself, it would definitely slot into a nice summer racing facility.

Q: What about going back to Hazel Park?

A: To my knowledge, there hasn't been any discussion about bringing back harness racing at Hazel Park in the near future. I wouldn't put anything out of the realm of possibilities but at this point I think it's highly unlikely.

Q: But there is still the matter of \$1 million being held in escrow derived from simulcasting money that is earmarked for harness racing at Hazel Park?

A: That is a good question. The Gaming Control Board has been pretty adamant that there is no mechanism in the current racing law to move the money from Hazel Park to another facility. But it can't sit in escrow forever. I would hope eventually the money is just released to the Standardbreds for the facility we have a contract with.

Q: Would a boutique meet at Hazel Park work to distribute that money?

A: I think it's a double-edge sword. When we raced in 2014 for the 10 days and we raced for all the money in those 10 days, out-of-state horses were coming in to race because it was easy money for them. Michigan horses weren't getting the opportunity to race for that money, so from a protective standpoint I don't think it's in the best interest of the Michigan horsemen to have a small boutique meet where they are fighting to get in. It appeared we couldn't get protection on the conditions to allow Michigan horses to get preference.

Q: Horsemen racing at Northville are paying a starting fee?

A: It's 1 1/2 percent of the advertised purse. It comes out of a horsemen's pocket; you pay when you get to the track. I certainly know the pain because I had a rough meet at Northville and paid more money out than came in.

Q: In the end, it is still all worth it?

A: I'm just trying to do what I can. I'm not doing it to win friends, I'm just trying to make sure I can keep racing around.