

# Match Racing in Oklahoma

by Clydia Nahwooksy and  
Fred Nahwooksy

*"Last call, race number one. Three hundred and fifty yards, for three year olds and up, 89 and under speed index. Report to the saddling paddock..."*

Thus begins another weekend of sprint racing in Oklahoma. Quarter horses of every size, color, and description go to post each weekend at one of the many Oklahoma tracks: Blue Ribbon Downs, Ross Meadows, Apache Downs, Garfield Downs, Wildcat Junction, Talequah Raceway, Woodward, and Midway Downs.

Sprint horse racing began in colonial Virginia, the first quarter horse race being recorded in Enrico County in 1674. "In colonial days any fallow field or thoroughfare served as a racetrack, a fact which probably accounts for the dirt running surface which evolved in America" (D. Essary, "Quarter Horse Racing," *The American Quarter Horse Association*, 1980, p. 5).

"History records that in 1611, seventeen native English stallions and mares were imported to Virginia. The blood of the English horses was crossed with horses of Spanish ancestry (the Spanish Barb) to produce a compact and heavily muscled horse which could run short distances at incredible speed. The colonists called them Quarter Patters and later they became known as the Illustrious Colonial Quarter of a Mile Running Horse, or Quarter Horse" (*Ibid.*, p. 4).

As the frontier moved westward, it became necessary to use the quarter horse to herd cattle. Known for its durability and short speed, it was natural that cowboys would use the quarter horse for recreational purposes as well as work. Thus the rodeo developed from the work of cowboys and has grown into a multimillion dollar industry.

It is not certain when the first match race was held in Oklahoma, but one can almost imagine one day a century ago two cowboys riding along, as one leaned over to the other and said, "Bet this horse of mine can outrun that nag of yours!" and the race was on.

Match racing involves two horses going a prescribed distance in head to head competition. Where in the early days in Oklahoma, match races began from a standing start, today, starting gates are used. From match racing grew the more sophisticated quarter horse races of today. Weekly, throughout Oklahoma, owners fill the gates with hundreds of horses to race for the money and the satisfaction of knowing that they outran the others.

*"The gates are loaded. Riders down! And they're off... Coming to the front on the outside is the nine horse..."*

Owners, trainers, grooms and jockeys work the sprint horse for at least 120 days before the horse is ready for his first out, or start: halter breaking and gentling a colt; grooming, worming, shoeing and vaccinating; leg care and putting wind in the horse; feeding and gate breaking; schooling and hauling. Finally, it must be determined if the horse has the heart to run and win. After months of preparation and training the fateful day arrives when the horse experiences the first time out of the gate in competition with other horses.

*"... the horses are bunching on the rail now. At the mid-way point, the nine horse has a slight lead moving to the middle of the track. On the rail the number one horse is charging..."*

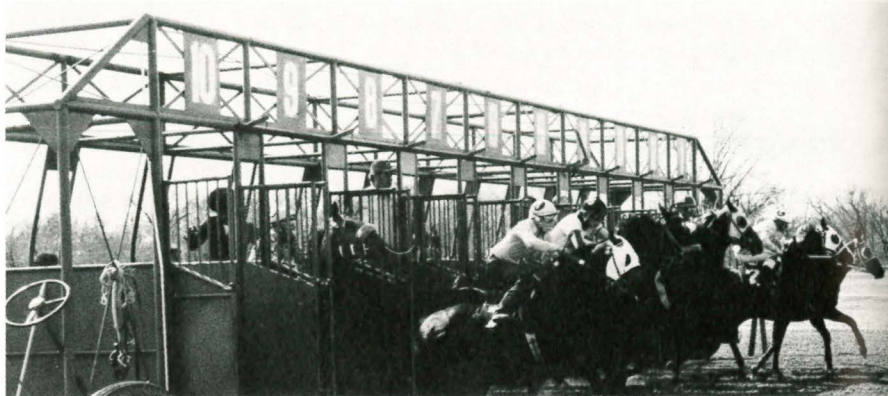
Traditionally, the owners of the respective horses in a match race would wager whatever they had against each other – sometimes cash, sometimes horse for horse, and often their own farms and ranches – in short, whatever

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Quarter Horses leaving the starting gate at race track in Enid, Oklahoma.



the owners agreed upon. The stakes were of less importance than the competition itself. It is still common today to hear a couple of horsemen say, "My horse can outrun your horse for a dollar or a thousand, going 350 . . . with daylight!" The lines are drawn.

*"The one horse is moving up to challenge the nine horse in the middle. Folks, we have a horse race. Charging hard now, it looks like it'll be a close finish . . ."*

Sprint horse racing continues to play a strong role in Oklahoman lifestyle. Breeding farms, racetracks, sales companies – among them the largest in the nation, training centers, and horse management and production programs have developed to meet the needs of horsemen in Oklahoma. A drive down any country road or superhighway in the state reveals how important horses are to Oklahomans. Not a mile goes by without one seeing a horse or two in pastures or small barns, or several hundred on a large breeding farm. Truly Oklahoma is horse country and the dream of someday owning and racing the horse that can "do it all" is alive in the minds of many across the state.

## Glossary of Terms Used in Match Racing

*(reprinted with the permission of The American Quarter Horse Association)*

**Age** – The age of a quarter horse is reckoned as beginning on the first day of January, of the year in which the horse is foaled (born). Even if a horse is foaled December 31st, it is considered one year old on January 1st (breeding is planned to avoid this).

**Backside** – The stable and training area of a race track.

**Bolt** – When a horse swerves sharply from his lane or the regular course he is said to have bolted.

**Breeder** – The breeder of a horse is considered to be the owner of its dam, at the time of service.

**Colt (c)** – A male quarter horse between the age of two and three.

**Cushion** – The loose top surface of the race track.

**Dam** – A female parent (mother).

**Deadheat** – Where the photo-finish camera shows two horses inseparable at the finish, the race is declared a deadheat or tie.

**Derby** – This is a stakes race exclusively for three-year-olds.

**Farrier** – A blacksmith specializing in the shoeing, or plating, of horses. In early days he was also a horse doctor.

**Field** – The entire group of starters in a race are known collectively as the field.

**Filly (f)** – A female quarter horse between the ages of two and three.

**Foal** – A young quarter horse of either sex between birth and first birthday.

**Futurity** – This is a stakes race exclusively for two-year-olds.

**Gelding (g)** – An altered or castrated male quarter horse of any age.

**Hand** – A unit of measurement (four inches) by which a horse's height is measured determined by placing one hand above the other from the ground



the withers or the point where the saddle sets. A horse that stands 15 hands is five feet tall at the withers.

*In the money* – A horse finishing first, second, or third is in the money.

*Irons* – Stirrups.

*Maiden* – A horse that has never won a race.

*Mare (m)* – A female quarter horse four years of age or older.

*Overnight* – A race for which entries close 72 hours or less before the post time for the first race on the day the race is to be run.

*Owner* – This includes sole owner, part owner, or lessee of a horse.

*Paddock* – The area where the horses are saddled and viewed prior to a race. The paddock is always adjacent to the jockeys' quarters.

*Post* – The starting point for the race.

*Post Parade* – The time period prior to the race when the horses leave the paddock, come on the race track, and walk in front of the stands in order for everyone to have a look at them.

*Post Position* – A horse's position in the starting gate.

*Sire* – A male parent (father).

*Stick* – The jockey's whip (sometimes called a bat).

*Tack* – The saddle and other equipment worn by a horse during a race or exercise.

*Time* – The axiom that time waits for no one is most true in a quarter horse race, because the time is broken into 1/100ths of a second. Quarter horses are timed from a standing start; the time begins the moment the starting gates open.

*Trainer* – The person who conditions and prepares horses for racing. The coach.

## Track Conditions

*Fast* – A track that is thoroughly dry and at its best. Footing is even.

*Sloppy* – During or immediately after a heavy rain and the water has saturated the cushion and may have puddles but the base is still firm. Footing is splashy but even and the running time remains fast.

*Muddy* – Water has soaked into the base and it is soft and wet. The footing is deep and slow.

*Heavy* – A drying track that is muddy and drying out. Footing is heavy and sticky.

*Slow* – Still wet, between heavy and good. Footing is heavy.

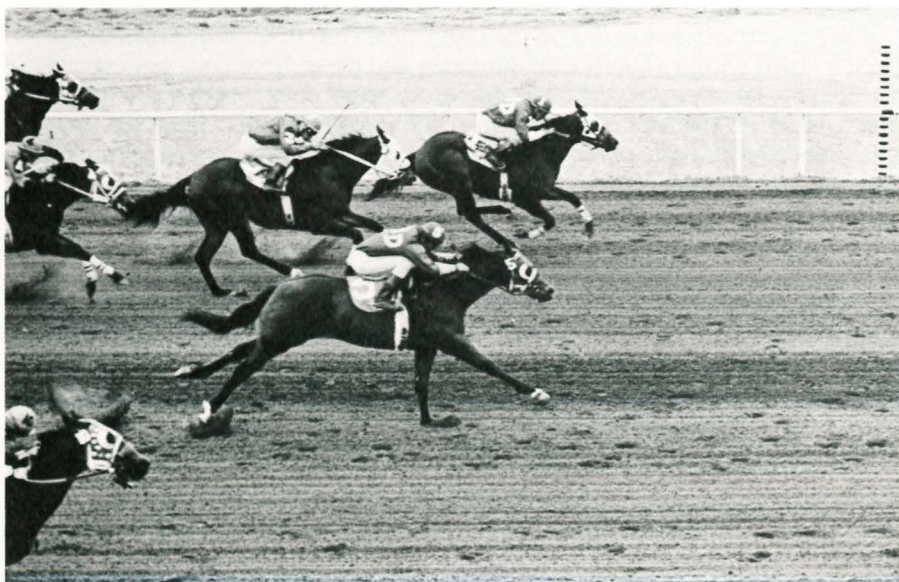
*Good* – Rated between slow and fast. Moisture remains in the strip but footing is firm.

*Off* – An off track is anything other than fast.

The usual progression of track conditions before and after a heavy rain is:

Fast – Sloppy – Muddy – Heavy – Slow – Good – Fast.

Essary, D., *Quarter Horse Racing*, The American Quarter Horse Assoc., 1980.



Quarter Horse racing.  
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