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## Scioto Downer

The once-proud harness track is pulling up lame. Do its West Virginia owners really care?

By Sara Smith

Sandy and Andy Albert have been driving the starting gate at Scioto Downs for 17 years. The metal arms on either side of the 2001 gold Cadillac spread out like wings, and the horses line up with noses pressed against the mesh.

Looking down at the bright green speedometer, Sandy shouts to her husband, "Twenty, 25, 30, go."

From his specially designed backward-facing rear seat, Andy flips a switch. The wings close against the side of the vehicle as it accelerates to get out of the way of the horses, and the race is on.

Even if you haven't bet \$100 in the fourth, with \$50 to win and \$50 to place, the spectacle is exhilarating. But there are only a handful of fans in the grandstand to see it.

On this Saturday evening—generally the track's busiest night of the week—it looks as if the workers at the track and the 850 horses on the grounds might outnumber the people there to gamble.

High above the track, in the Penthouse, retro chandeliers that look like flying saucers from a sci-fi movie pay homage to the ambiance of the track's heyday.

But instead of well-heeled diners enjoying a classy night out, the room is filled with wood cubbies and simulcast televisions broadcasting races from around the country.

Even more simulcast TVs are bolted up where the walls meet the ceiling, competing with neon Bud Light signs for attention. A few people hover under the TVs, clutching little white tickets. Others sit at the bar, the hum of their grumbles occasionally drowned out by the amplified voice of Ayers Ratcliff, Scioto's lively track announcer.

The ponies, the characters and the retro lighting are charming, but they're not enough to save this starving track. Attendance is down, and purses are woefully small.

Like other Ohio horse tracks, Scioto Downs hopes to be saved by the very thing that's helping to kill it: the seductive flicker of slot machines.

As tracks in other states have shown, the formula's simple. Fill a room at the track with slots and use part of the proceeds to subsidize the horse racing.



It's not exactly romantic, but if you love the track—or make your living there—it's better than seeing those

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## **Scioto's owner hasn't backed Learn & Earn**

Penthouse chandeliers go dark forever. "The state of Ohio is looking to bring slot machines in," said Ed Ryan, Scioto Downs' general manager. "We certainly would like to see that happen."

Something needs to happen. West Virginia's MTR Gaming Group, which acquired the track three years ago, reported losses of more than \$5 million in 2005 at Scioto Downs, which is an improvement over the loss of \$6 million-plus in 2004.

With numbers like that, it's a safe bet that MTR—whose overall financial performance is strong— will have to take drastic measures to stop the bleeding.

Unless, of course, MTR didn't purchase the financial dead weight that is Scioto Downs to turn it into a cash cow. Ted Arneault, MTR's president, hinted in a December 2002 Dispatch article that the Scioto acquisition was a strategic move to protect Mountaineer Race Track and Gaming Resort, the company's super-sized West Virginia property, which draws heavily from Ohio.



The purchase of Scioto Downs fits well with MTR's strategy of buying up competing properties in states that border West Virginia, said Arneault, who did not return calls for this story.

Scioto Downs already has shortened its racing season by 13 days in an effort to increase purse sizes. The track brought in simulcast racing to help plump up profits in 2000, but when bettors have Internet gambling in the den and casino gaming just a short car ride away, betting the ponies— even on dozens of TV screens—feels bloody inconvenient to all but the purists.

"It's not going to turn around soon," Ryan said. "Attendance is down. They can sit in the comfort of their own home and not spend \$3 a gallon getting here."

Before DSL and Midwestern casinos, Scioto was worth the drive. In 1959, when Charlie Hill opened "Ohio's Showplace of Racing," it was a gleaming mecca, lighting up the rural southern reaches of Franklin County on warm summer nights.

The facility thrived not just from the wagers of racing-savvy railbirds but on a steady diet of amateur bettors looking for a swinging night at the track. Well-heeled couples from the city would get a sitter for the kids, dress up and head out to dinner at the Penthouse, where they'd splurge on juicy steaks and try to remember how to box a trifecta.

Glimpses of the glory days can still be spotted in the Clubhouse restaurant. On Saturday night, there were men in ties and women showing off their best jewelry.

But too often, they weren't looking out the big picture window at the track. They were monitoring the simulcast TVs at every table.

Even Ryan, the GM, admitted, "They come to watch the simulcast."

Ohio has long been one of the nation's foremost harness racing states and has the sixth-largest horse population in the country. The Ohio State Racing Commission estimates horse racing is more than a billion-dollar-a-year industry in Ohio.

But the purses are puny, driving the best horses elsewhere. Tracks in slots-subsidized states are seeing purses five times bigger than Ohio's average of \$3,909.

That's why the vast majority of the state's tracks have lined up behind the "Learn & Earn" campaign, which is gathering signatures for a November ballot issue to allow slots at tracks throughout the state.

Thirty percent of the revenue from the slots would fund a college scholarship program. Six percent would go toward increasing purses at racetracks.



"It would make Ohio tracks competitive with surrounding states, where all the money is going to now," Ryan said.

Only one track in the state has declined to back Learn & Earn: Scioto Downs.

Officially, Scioto is in favor of a more liberal constitutional amendment than Learn & Earn is pitching—one that would allow table games in addition to slots. Yet another gambling group, Queen City Gaming Entertainment in Cincinnati, is trying to qualify for the ballot with a table-games plan, and Scioto's not backing that one either.

It leads to a lot of suspicion. A close observer of Scioto Downs and the Ohio racing industry said he thinks MTR is sacrificing Scioto in an effort to keep gaming out of Ohio.

MTR owns tracks and gaming S resorts in West Virginia and I Pennsylvania, a new player in the slots game. Both stand to lose business if Ohio OKs slot machines.

"I think they're trying to keep them out," the observer said. "It certainly seems that way."

He said MTR has deep pockets and could afford to take a loss on Scioto Downs in order to be a presence—perhaps a disruptive one—in the Ohio gaming issue this November.

Not that any assistance from MTR is needed to squash the issue. Ohio voters have defeated gaming amendments before, and on Capitol Square, slots have few backers and powerful opponents. The current governor opposes gaming for Ohio, as do both men who are competing to replace him.

"If this were any other billion-dollar-a-year industry in the state, politicians would be falling all over themselves to save it," said Jerry Knappenberger, general manager of the Ohio Harness

Horsemen's Association. "What we're going to have to do if we don't get this is continue to downsize."

He hopes that message, coupled with a marketing campaign built on the promise of college educations, will convince Ohio voters to join their neighbors in other states and welcome slots. If they do, it will shock most political experts.

More likely, the voters will decide once again that the lure of the shiny slot machine is indeed resistible.

Which outcome Scioto Downs' West Virginia owners are rooting for is anyone's guess.

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