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Ak-Sar-Ben races offer excitement and a chance to shuffle some money

By Mark Davis

Note: This story contains the opinions of the author.

Pack your bags, we're taking a trip. Until August 25, the ponies will be running at Ak-Sar-Ben. For those empty days of summer, the horse races provide a fulfilling and relaxing way to spend some time — and extra cash. And for a comparatively low price, there aren't many better entertainment bargains around.

Tuesday through Saturday \$2 will buy admission to the grandstands. For a little more, \$6, you can get into the clubhouse and enjoy the comfort of air-conditioning and refreshments. If you have three friends with you, \$6 more will reserve you a turf garden table.

But to be where the real action is, the grandstand is the place to be. The people are always near and noisy, the track is only yards from you, and the familiar aroma of adrenaline is dense in the air.

Last year the daily average parimutual funds (the total amount wagered) ran \$1,612,152. The totals for the year at Ak-Sar-Ben are even more impressive at \$137,032,883. But don't let that scare you away. Betting starts at \$2 a ticket, a small price to pay for the excitement exclusive to the races.

The hour-drive from Lincoln passes quickly even though conversation usually is stifled by anticipation. From the minute you enter the grandstands your heart beats to the rhythm of the ponies' hooves.

After settling into the pattern of reading the odds board and watching the clock, you notice that everyone has that same dazed look on their faces. It comes from your soul, mingling with the spirit of an animal let loose to challenge itself with the odds. Even if your horse is dead last, there is a chant in your heart echoing all the way up to your head, escaping through your mouth, "Come on Magic Dee, let's go Magic, come on Magic!" A little prayer never hurts even if your horse finishes ninth in a field of 12. When the race is "official," there is never time to sulk, (except in the last race). Time spent looking other places than the program or the odds board is time wasted.

The chance that you will win a big pay off is slim but it is always there, and hope never leaves. In a \$2 pic-six bet (choosing the winner of the first six

races) a lucky handicapper (that's what you call yourself after you win your first race) won \$225,000. The highest \$2 return on a regular race was \$307. The record return for a daily double (picking the winner of the first two races of the day) was \$4,897. And the highest payoff for an exacta (picking the win and place horses in an exacta race) in Ak-Sar-Ben history was \$3,483.

You always think of the possibility of a record payoff when the public address system informs you that your horse is moving out of the fifth position on the inside track.



"And around the turn it's George And I running nose and nose with Tight System. Then it's Peggy Pitso back by a half a length and Miss Double Dancer following. Coming into the stretch it's George And I but Tanna Hill is making a move on the outside."

Your chant becomes a shout and then a scream as Tanna passes George And I with Peggy Pitso and Tight System right on her tail. Unconsciously you move to the fence where your body is restrained, but your spirit jumps on the spurs and you're the rider. "It's Peggy Pitso by a nose, Peggy Pitso, now Tight System moves up by a head but Tanna Hill is finishing strong." Hey that's me. "Now it's Tanna Hill by a head," your sprinting faster than your heart now which is exploding. "And it's Tanna Hill with Tight System and Peggy Pitso with a photo finish for second."

A split second passes when you hear nothing. Then you turn and look into the large eyes of a stranger that has bet on the same horse. Immediately they're your best friend you celebrate as others throw their tickets into the air. You restrain the urge to run and cash in your ticket because experts cash their tickets when they place their next bet.

After your first win ticket is cashed and the odds board promises to enhance your winnings tenfold, your chance and screams take on a more professional sound.

Win, break even, or lose, you leave the Ak-Sar-Ben track, one of the top 10 tracks in the nation, knowing that you have accomplished something. A large sun is setting on the horizon as you stop at "U Save Two Cents" and bet on K So Bud in the tenth. You and new found or old friends stay up for hours and reminisce of the day's excitement.

After Ak-Sar-Ben finishes its 85-day extended season, the ponies will run at the State Fair Grounds in Lincoln. The season here in Lincoln begins September 14 and ends October 12. See you at the track.

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