

Del Mar Thoroughbred Club Keeps Up the Pace

The equestrian world's pedigreed A-list rides into Del Mar this season for SoCal's racing destination of choice.

Ring-a-ding-ding, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club— one of those peculiarly Southern California-retro institutions that have managed to retain its hipness for eight decades—raises the starting gate for a new season July 16. A glamorous trot ever since cofounder Bing Crosby acted as ticket taker for the first race in 1937 (other partners included Pat O'Brien, Oliver Hardy, and Gary Cooper), this one-mile oval has witnessed some of thoroughbred racing's biggest moments, including Seabiscuit's dark-horse victory in 1938 and legendary jockey Bill Shoemaker's record-breaking wins over three decades on the track.

For those in the know, opening day is when some 44,000 fans pack into the distinctive tan grandstand right on the ocean, sporting some of the most elegant and over-the-top (literally) hats—from pillboxes to 10-foot-tall numbers. "It's such a big people-watching day that some say the race isn't even necessary," notes Del Mar's marketing honcho, Craig Dado. "It's like England's Ascot, except a lot more outrageous and sexy." Despite the fact that this is officially "where the turf hits the surf," there's a certain fashionable elegance that pervades all races—"people really dress up for them," adds Dado.

But the old place has taken on a new sheen. To make it consistent with other courses on the Southern California racing circuit, the track is being replaced using 31,000 tons of El Segundo sand, the same stuff being dumped on the nearby racetrack at Santa Anita. "It's safer for horses to have [the same kind of] dirt when racing between the two," says Dado. Also, Del Mar has taken over several races that

used to be run on the recently closed Hollywood Park racetrack, which means it has added a second season in the fall. For now, 43 races are on the calendar for summer, topped by the \$1 million TVG Pacific Classic (August 22) and the ever-popular \$300,000 Bing Crosby Stake (July 26), now almost into its seventh decade.

As with the racetrack's halcyon Hollywood years, Del Mar's glamorous allure goes far beyond horseracing. The track and adjoining grounds will also be hosting VIP parties, craft beer and food festivals, and free concerts after the last horse crosses the finish line.

Just don't forget to wear a hat.