

The Sackville Downs

On a chilly winter's afternoon in 1952 at the harness racing track on the Halifax Commons, a race fan was chatting with another racing enthusiast, John T. Cruickshank, about the predicament of their favourite sport. During the conversation the fan asked Mr. Cruickshank, "Why don't we have any worthwhile racing facilities in this area? How come somebody doesn't do something about it?" This appears to have been a good question to pose, and one that would be answered within three years.

Mr. Cruickshank operated a dairy farm in Lower Sackville. The Cruickshank farm occupied 250 acres of prime land. With his mind now more on harness racing than dairy farming, horses were soon to replace the cows grazing in the pastures.

Harness racing was a new business opportunity for Cruickshank, but not as a sport to the founder of the Sackville Downs Raceway. He knew and enjoyed horseracing and now he was set to make it a fulltime venture.

Construction took place just yards from the Sackville Raceway that had operated in the late 1940's and early 1950's. The troubles that saw the demise of the old track caused issues for the new track as well. Among the problems, were: distance from the city, lack of good patron facilities and a general apathy of the sport. Hockey and baseball were all the rage.



By the late 1960's fans were turning out in increasing numbers. With the increased fan base, the Sackville Downs changed with the times. The track

moved from a manually operated wooden tote board to an electric western tote. The small grandstand was increased to seat 1,500 people.

By 1970, the Downs netted three million in bets.

A Love of Racing

Shirley Major began working in the office of the Sackville Downs track in 1956, and spent a total of 15 years working both the winter and summer meets. She became the first woman in the Maritimes to hold a United States Race Secretary License in 1969. She also held an associate judge's license from the United States Trotting Association.

"It's really difficult for a woman to gain recognition as an official in harness racing; I felt discrimination from the very beginning, but I loved racing and stuck with it," indicated Major.

A Modern Track

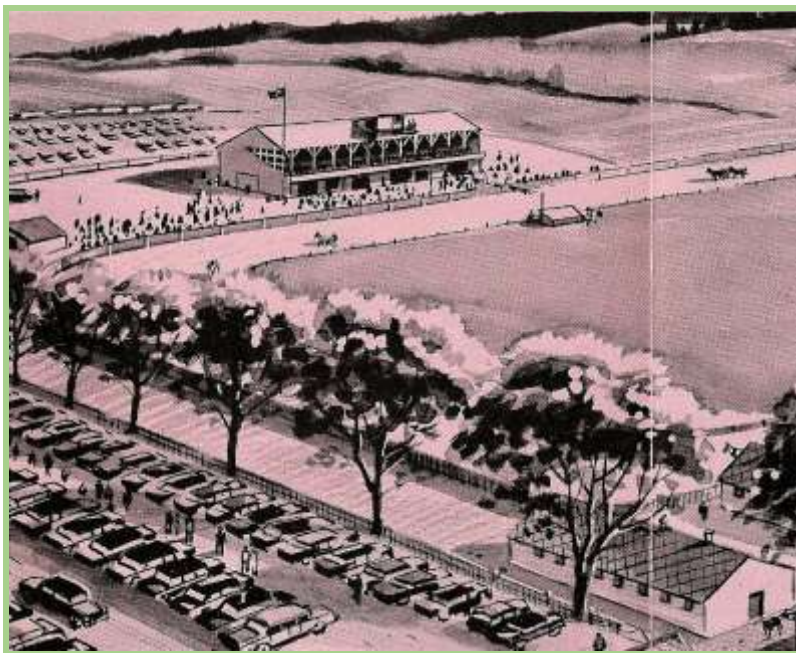
Between 1973 to 1975, nearly three quarters of a million dollars was spent modernizing the track, which included a heated grandstand and a dinning room, which attracted more women to what was traditionally a man's sport.



Improvements to the facilities, belief in the growth of the sport, planning for the future, coupled with overall cooperation from the men who owned and raced the horses led to Sackville Downs being billed the "Harness Centre of the Maritimes".



Into the 1980's the track's fan base and interest eventually withered, and with costs exceeding revenues, the track ceased operations in 1986. With the closing of the track, came the end of a dream, an attraction, and a visible reminder of the changing landscape of Sackville.



The site of the Sackville Downs is now home to the Downsview Plaza, along the heart of Sackville's business district, Sackville Drive.