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Woodbine raises the bar for ?day at the races?

by MARK PAVILONS

In many ways, summer means participating in some Canadian pastimes.

You may not agree, but a day at the races fits the bill just nicely.

It's been said in all sports, horse racing has the best ?characters.?

Woodbine Race?Track and the expanded facilties have been legendary in this part of Ontario for generations.

While it's primarily an adult playground, it can be a family affair and almost everyone can enjoy the facility and its activities. It's a perfect venue for a sunny summer afternoon.

Our family marked a special occasion there recently, and I?must say it was one of the most exciting times in recent years. There are a host of very nice eating establishments at the track, including our venue The Woodbine Club. Very nice, indeed. The food was exquisite.

Like a well designed cruise ship, the views from the club are really spectacular. It doesn't matter if you don't know much about betting the ponies, it's a fantastic setting for any occasion or celebration. It screams excitement!

It wasn't our first visit to Woodbine, or our last. It has been a must-visit locale for our extended family for many years.

Long before the casino opened, my parents and I visited the track regularly in the summer months. They both loved it and while we didn't always win, the outings were always memorable.

One particular Father's Day sticks out in my mind and will for as long as I?live. I took my dad for his annual Father's Day treat and this day was quite fruitful, as fate would have it. Armed with his thoughtful triactor pick, my dad sent me to the booth. I?called out the numbers and the lady asked if I wanted them ?boxed,??which increases your odds tremendously as the horses can finish in any order. I?said ?sure,? and the cost of bet went from $4 to $12. I?went back to my dad and said the ticket cost $12. At first, he frowned at being out the $8 extra. He was not frowning when his picks came in! That one race garnered him $7,500 thanks to a series of fortunate events.

I?think the smile didn't leave his face for a month! He went back, of course, the very next week, but never matched this success.

It's a day I will always remember.

Sentiment aside, it's quite the sport. You can't help but love the animals themselves, well bred thoroughbreds all. You have to admire the skills and training of everyone involved ? the jockeys, trainers, managers and owners.

Unlike the messy, unkempt scenes depicted in Hollywood films, this race track is almost spotless, and quite modern. It's a testament to not only the regard for horse racing, but to meet the needs of an ever-demanding consumer. Today's folks want thrills fun, great food and a total experience. They also don't mind dressing up a bit for the races.

My youngest would like nothing more than to become a real-life diva, so she reveled in the idea of rubbing elbows with high society. That definitely was the atmosphere at racetracks years ago, but today's facilities welcome one and all. But the ?sport of kings??still has that air about it.

King and nearby Caledon are well known for a love of horses and many world-class equestrians call this area home. We also have some of the top breeders in the country.

While I've never raced a horse personally, I think it must be an amazing feeling, guiding such a muscular beast down the stretch.

Back to the fun aspect of Woodbine.

This facility really does offer a lot, a big bang for the buck.

Once you're finished your meal, pleasant conversation, along with periodic shouts of joy, you can stretch your legs by walking the grounds. Or you can find your way down to the casino and park yourself in front of the slots, or at one of the tables.

My parents also loved testing their luck. I was the first in the family to venture to Las Vegas with a college friend one summer. I?still remember my dad saying I was stupid, and that it was a huge waste of money. I?returned with stories of how fantastic and out-of-this-world Vegas was. It piqued their interest and maybe a year later, they went on their first jaunt. Back then, 2-to-4-night stays were abundant and reasonable.

This was a case of the student teaching the teachers (my parents). They fell in love with Vegas and the whole exciting atmosphere of around-the-clock fun. From there, they ventured to Atlantic City and tried the slots in the Bahamas and Aruba. When bus visits for seniors were popular with Ontario casinos, they jumped aboard. My dad likely lost more than he ever won, but for them it was a lot of fun.

My wife and I have found our ?niche? in playing roulette. Playing together we can cover a lot of the table and my wife has always been able to beat the odds. Getting her to stop is another matter, but we're both getting a bit wiser and more frugal these days.

I have been anxiously awaiting those ?big plans? for the Woodbine expansion. I?believe it will be an amazing, ultra-modern entertainment ?hub.? Judging from preliminary concept plans, this is going to be a beautiful facility and huge draw in the GTA.

Next to ?he scores,? I believe ?they're off??is one of the sweetest sounds for a Canadian!