



# A True Western Maverick

He's brass, profane and colourful and Bobby Allen, the owner of Alberta Downs, could also be the saviour of harness racing in Alberta. Story and photos by Jonathan Huntington

Bobby Allen is a true racing maverick in western Canada.

Words can barely do justice to the story of the owner of Alberta Downs which is on the outskirts of Lacombe, a small city of 11,000 people between Calgary and Edmonton.

Depending on the time of day and who you talk to, Allen is one of the following: a maverick with millions invested into western Canada's only one-mile track, an outspoken racing lover who doesn't care about his critics or the potential saviour of the sport in Alberta.

Allen is the very definition of a maverick: independent and unorthodox in some areas.

At the staggering age of 70, although he looks and acts like he is at least 20 years younger, the Calgary native is about to open the doors to Alberta Downs for a second year of harness racing.

The only owner and operator of the dual-track facility, a one-mile dirt surface and seven-eighths mile turf track, Allen has taken an estimated \$10 million out of his bank account to make his dream a reality.



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## A TRUE WESTERN MAVERICK



"I'm under budget," he remarked. "And I never had more than four men at once build this place. I wanted the costs (down) and I didn't go out and get all these expensive sub contractors and all that shit. I just did it without them."

From driving the tractor, to pounding nails to being the banker, Allen seems to tackle any job at his track. Buying the land four years ago, he started construction in 2008 partially out of frustration.

"I was pissed off about Trout Springs," he shot, referring to another track he owned for 15 years before losing it in 1996 to foreclosure. "And people were dragging their asses in Calgary."

That is a direct blast at the long-delayed attempt to open a racetrack just north of the Calgary airport in Balzac. With high-profile wealthy investors behind it, the United Horsemen of Alberta have run into major roadblocks for years in Balzac while Allen has done it all on his own.

"If ever a field of dreams existed (in horse racing), it is in Lacombe," said Fred Gillis, the manager of the Alberta Standardbred Horse Association. "When (Allen started construction) he had no permits. He had absolutely nothing. He hadn't

**Standardbred racing, including most of the top stables in the province, will return for a second year of racing at Alberta Downs, on May 8.**

passed (through the stages of) any county legislation. But he never stopped.

"He's 70 years-old and I think he could sit back and enjoy life. But he has a dream."

While he is sometimes a little rough around the edges, nobody can doubt Allen's passion for racing.

And nobody would ever say that Allen is dull. Outspoken, profane and colourful on many topics, he is a journalist's dream.

"I could have kept the \$10 million, but what would I do? Lay on the beach and get fat?" cracked Allen when asked why he has invested so much into Alberta Downs. One thing is for sure, laying on the beach would have started less rumours and attracted less critics.

Detractors have lined up to take shots, calling him crazy, too stubborn and other terms not fit for print. Rumours have circulated about holes in his track and water flowing out.

But Allen could care less about his critics and the rumours. "I look at what (the critics) have got. How can you give me advice when you don't have f\*\*k all?" ripped Allen.

Just a few weeks before opening day on May 8, the Alberta Downs dirt track seems to be in fine shape. There were some holes last spring that forced the cancellation of some cards in year one of the track but Allen declares that problem is fixed.

While watching his own horses, he has 18 Thoroughbreds and two Standardbreds, train over the surface in mid-March, it's tough to argue.

A horse owner for nearly half a century, Allen's passion for horses comes from his father who had a ranch full of 40 to 50 horses. Before deciding to build Alberta Downs, Allen had enough money to go play against the biggest owners in racing.

"A lot of guys said: 'Why don't you just buy two good horses and go to Santa Anita?' With two good horses you would

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get so damn bored sitting down there," reasoned Allen.

That leaves him in Lacombe trying to finish the latest phase of construction on his grandstand before opening afternoon.

Allen is the unquestioned saviour of harness racing in Alberta. Without Alberta Downs, Standardbred racing would likely be near extinction in this province.

"We'd be in deep trouble," admitted Gillis. "Grande Prairie isn't the answer. It's too far out of the mainstream.

"Ninety per cent of our owner base is in the corridor of Edmonton and Calgary." Lacombe is one hour south of Edmonton, right along the highway that connects to Calgary.

The lack of a track in Calgary has led to Edmonton's Northlands Park offering Thoroughbred racing from May to October, leaving the Standardbreds with just a winter and fall campaign in Edmonton.

Grande Prairie, which is five hours north of Edmonton, hosted an extended summer harness meet in 2009, but it flopped. After just a few days of harness action last April, Alberta Downs steps into the spotlight this summer with a 50-day meet replacing Grande Prairie on the calendar.

**Construction continues on the two-floor grandstand at Alberta Downs with hopes that it will be completed before the start of the 2010 racing season.**

Offering almost \$1 million in stakes, the campaign will roll right through the summer to August 29. But Allen has bigger plans than this.

"I didn't start this to be a harness track, that is for sure," he stated. The bigger plan is Thoroughbred dates and turf racing.

That's not going to happen this year. However, he has gained the attention of the Thoroughbred horsemen in this province.

"Bobby Allen certainly has had and continues to have lots of try in him," said Mat Monaco, the executive director of the HBPA. "It is unfortunate that up to now he has come up short on fulfilling his passion of building and operating a first-class racetrack. From where I sit he seems to be one of the few operators that has invested his own dollars and genuinely wants racing to grow and prosper in Alberta."

For Alberta Downs to grow and pros-

per, Allen will have to finish construction of the two-floor grandstand, add to the 315 stalls in the backstretch, offer some outdoor amenities and, most importantly, find another revenue stream. Wealthy from selling water off a parcel of land he owns west of Calgary, Allen is understandably reluctant to spend more money out of his own pocket until he sees some return on the investment in his track.

Without simulcasting in his facility or slot machines, year-round revenue will be impossible. Attaining a licence for slots appears to be longshot. "For one thing, the county (of Lacombe) wants \$2 million cash up front to pave the road before they will even entertain (the idea of a slot centre)," said Allen.

The winding road off the main highway to Alberta Downs, like the parking lots and racetrack grounds, is all gravel. Receiving permission to offer simulcast racing seems slightly more realistic.

But Allen wants to push the envelope

Track	Race	MTP	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Track Cond.
NP	6	1	4/1	7/2	3/1	5/1	2/1	9/7	8/5	2/1	SCR	SCR	SCR	SCR	FAST
DEL	4	4	2/1	7/4	7/1	2/1	3/2	2/1	2/1	2/1	2/1	2/1	9/5	SCR	FIRM
STP	9	8	7/1	9/5	8/5	7/3	3/2	7/4	7/2	SCR	SCR	SCR	SCR	SCR	Tapeta
HP	1	16	4/3	9/2	8/7	4/3	7/6	4/3	7/4	9/1	3/2	3/1	SCR	SCR	FAST

**9 RACE** **TURF PARADISE**  
**M/L** **COYOTE HANDICAP**  
 3 Year Olds & Up 6 1/2 Furlongs **TRACK FAST**

1	3	<b>TWIN SPARKS</b> NICK	RY EIKLEBERRY
2	20	<b>HEZAMAZING</b>	VICKY BAZE
3	10	<b>SEARCHFORTHETRUTH</b>	JORGE CARRENO
4	15	<b>LIGHTNING TANNER</b>	DARIO LOZOYA
5	4	<b>GOIN' DANCIN</b>	DANIEL VERGARA
6	8	<b>YANKEE BRAVO</b>	JAKE BARTON
7	8	<b>NOSIR</b>	VINCE GUERRA

1 MIN TURF 6 117  
 3 MIN DDX 7  
 14 MIN FG 10 7



ALBERTA DOWNS  
8:51 AM MST 3/15/2010

WHITE IRON

It was recently announced that the Alberta Standardbred Horse Association will pay \$100,000 of the \$125,000 costs to have the four months of Standardbred racing at Alberta Downs simulcast.

like usual and is trying to move forward with web-streaming of racing. In the basement of his home on a quiet street in Lacombe, Allen has spent almost \$100,000 on equipment to offer web-streaming on his own website.

The grand plan is to push web-streamed simulcast races into every home in Alberta through his Internet site, with a betting option.

"In my mind, racing has to quit depending on slot machines," he declared. "I think the answer is right here (with web-streaming). Get your costs down (from satellite uplinking racing), expand your fan base and I think it will pay for itself."

Resistance to web-streaming is widespread in the racing industry, which explains why Allen hasn't launched his website service to the public. Yet he continues to push.

But where this maverick can really make his stamp in racing is in Calgary. Allen might be the only hope for racing in Alberta's largest city. If the United Horsemen of Alberta follow through on their current plan to be debt free this year, Allen is willing to finish building the track north of the Calgary airport.

"I know what I can do it for, but everybody thinks I am crazy. I can do it for another \$10 million. It is so god-damn easy, it is pathetic," he blurted.

That would make him the saviour of the sport in Alberta and add another chapter to his story. 🐾

## CALL FOR ENTRIES

### Alberta Standardbred Horse Association Annual Yearling Sale

Saturday, August 28, 2010

Olds Agricultural Society - Megadome in Olds, Alberta  
Sale starts at 4 p.m.

Entries Due: **May 1, 2010**

Consignment Fee: \$250 plus GST

Join us for a BBQ lunch  
Saturday, August 28 at noon followed by the sale at 4 p.m.



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