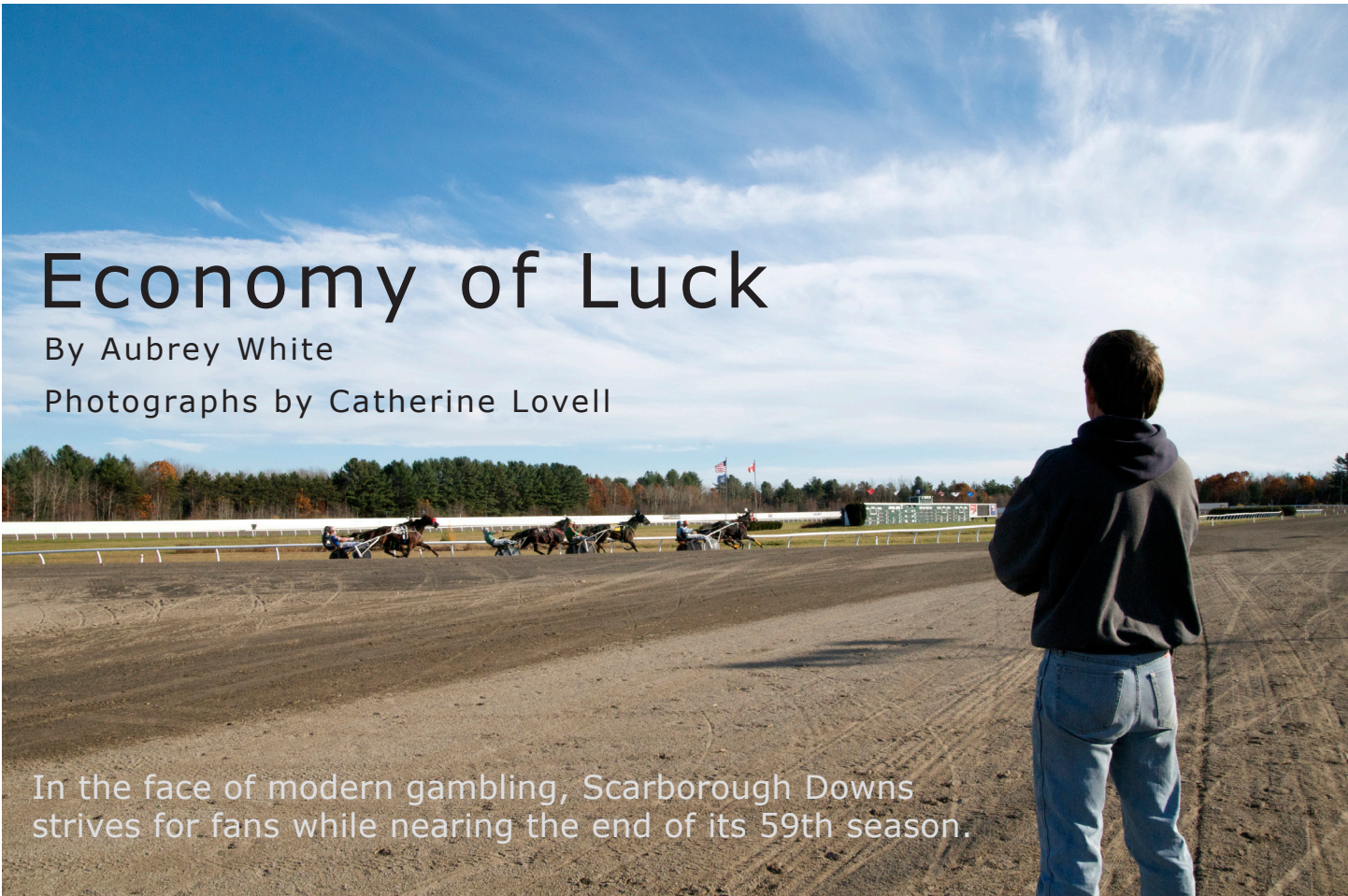


Economy of Luck

By Aubrey White

Photographs by Catherine Lovell



In the face of modern gambling, Scarborough Downs strives for fans while nearing the end of its 59th season.

Guiding his horse, Sugar Valley Cathy, toward the track, Freddy Ward secures her harness and affectionately pats her rear quarter as she sets off to race. He runs to the sidelines and anxiously watches the competition begin. Nearing the end of the first lap, as Cathy rounds the turn close to Freddy, he whistles for her attention, hoping she'll recognize his call and push past the horses in front. All of the work put into this horse during the week culminates in just under two minutes of anticipation. The race is a gamble and also Freddy's source of income. He brushes his chestnut hair away from his forehead, awaiting the finish.

Freddy races his horses each week at Scarborough Downs, a harness racing track tucked behind tall pines off Route One in Scarborough, Maine. In the sport, horses race around a half-mile track, pulling drivers on two-wheeled carts known as sulkies. Straps called hobbles are tied around the horses' legs to control their gait and keep each step in line with the previous. Horses' heads are held up

with a metal 'overcheck' placed in the mouth and strapped firmly to the harness. In harness racing, one must maintain proper form.

For 59 years, the Downs has been home to southern Maine's horse racing tradition. Towering above the track and encased in windows, the upper grandstand once filled each weekend. Freddy fondly remembers the packed bleachers. "They just couldn't get enough of it," he says, "it was the only gambling there was."

But the once widely revered track is showing its age. Over fifteen years ago when the fans began to dwindle, Scarborough Downs closed its upper grandstand. Today its railings are covered in dust. The view through the glass onto the track is hazy through years of weather and dirt. The grandstand that once held several thousand fans at a time sits empty. Through brassy speakers the familiar

Photo: Once his horse is in motion, Freddy Ward's control as a trainer is limited to how loud he can whistle.



Announcer Mike Sweeney is the voice of each race at the Downs.



Following a race, Freddy tends to his horse's chronic injuries.

bugle theme calls the horses to start, echoing a lonely pep and verve through the building.

The track's announcer, Mike Sweeney, calls each race with a sing-song voice that resonates of earlier times. "Field of eight, now on gait, and behind the starting gate, this field has now reached the head of the lane. They wheel into the stretch and heeere they come!" Sweeney's voice maintains the excitement of the Downs, but the crowds are far from boisterous.

In the lower grandstand, a gymnasium-sized lobby with cement floors, as few as a hundred fans are scattered around tables and along the two rows of stadium seats. Crumpled papers litter the floor—lost bets tossed aside—once money, now trash. There are a handful of families with young children present, but many of the patrons are elderly, still coming to the Downs after years as fans.

Freddy knows the crowd well. "Right now we've shrunk to that state where if you don't know somebody that owns a horse, you don't really want to go watch [the races], because there's so many other ways to gamble."

Sweeney attributes the lack of new blood to many factors, though one is particularly generational. "It's easier to push a button or pull a lever on a slot machine or a Playstation than it is to sit down and play a game of chess. And I think this sport is more like chess."

Throughout the afternoon, most people linger about the building watching simulcast races and chatting with friends. The atmosphere is quiet save Sweeney's voice. During the two minutes of each race, the fans lean in towards the track to watch, but rarely do they cheer.

"It's better to be lucky than good."

Freddy has been a horseman for 25 years. He depends on the speed of his horses for a livelihood and in turn on the bets placed by fans. His commitment as an owner and trainer can get Freddy far, but sending a horse to race is a gambling wager like any other. Quoting a former horseman, Freddy says, "It's better to be lucky than good."

For many people involved, the sport has dwindled from a full-time investment to a part-time hobby. They've sold their horses, found permanent jobs, or retired. Horsemen unable to cover the expense of maintaining horses often sell them to the Amish as plow-pullers. Freddy still keeps his clam digger's license in case he faces a particularly rough patch. Still, plenty of horsemen make their careers at the Downs, and those who work full-time here are hopeful for a turnaround in the track's success. To usher in that success, most have only one thing on their minds—slot machines.

Scarborough Downs is a small track with a comparatively low average purse (the prize for horsemen) of about \$3,000 per race. Until recently, it was even less. In 2005, the Bangor Raceway added slot machines to its track, greatly increasing its revenue and patronage. Under



Closed for over 15 years, the upper grandstand is a dusty relic for the industry.

agreements with the state of Maine, a percentage of the money from Bangor's slots makes its way to Scarborough as purse money, providing horsemen with more lucrative wins.

Freddy, who advocates with other horsemen for the slots says that, "as the [state] lotteries... have taken the gambling away from the horse racing industry, across the country, slot machines have kind of been the savior." Slots create a different spirit of luck, one disconnected from the intricacies of betting on horses. Regardless, they bring people to the tracks.

Though the city of Bangor welcomed slot machines, Scarborough has not been as friendly to the idea. In 2008, the city marginally rejected a ballot measure to allow slots.

The Downs has turned to simulcast betting to fill the gap. Patrons gamble on Scarborough's races from sites around the state and online. Presence at the track is no longer required to enjoy the races. In the last year, however, even the simulcast racing has shrunk, dropping almost 16%

in 2009. Scarborough is left to cut and pinch its struggling budget to keep afloat.

Next year the track will decrease the number of race days as a cost savings measure. For the horsemen, fewer race days mean more days of feeding and tending to horses without the possibility of a win on the track. As they see it, such a decrease will only drive horsemen out of the business—leaving Scarborough's stables as empty as its stands.

In the midst of today's race, that moment seems distant. The dearth of fans does not slow Sugar Valley Cathy's trot. Approaching the finish line, Cathy's driver lashes his whip, urging her to bravely take the lead. Today, she wins. Freddy sprints to the winner's circle where the troubles of his industry disappear for a moment in lieu of its sporting spirit. And this little track calls the horses to the starting gate over a thousand times a year, striving to keep its proper form for each and every race.

