



Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association

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Harness Horsemen Ready to Go Back To Work

Plan to safely race sent to IL. Dept. of Health & Governor

HINSDALE, IL—Thousands of workers employed in the harness racing industry are waiting to take to the track again to race without fans in the grandstand. Members of the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association (IHHA) have worked with the Illinois Department of Agriculture, the Illinois Department of Public Health and Hawthorne Racetrack to devise a safe, effective way to resume live racing.

"Live racing, without a live audience poses virtually zero risk and we are anxious and hopeful that the green light will be given soon for us to be off and running," said Clark Fairley, President of the IHHA. "Governor Pritzker has assured us that our plan is being reviewed, so we're hopeful that any day we can move forward."

Illinois is one of the few states that has not announced an opening date to resume live horseracing in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, horse racing is one of the few professional sports that is uniquely positioned to return since there is very little person to person contact in the first place. Racing enthusiasts note that the backstretch of Hawthorne Racetrack is already deemed an essential agricultural business since animals must be cared for every day. They also say that resuming live races would only add a handful of people to the track all of whom would be socially distanced.

"We're working without paychecks right now," said Trainer Angie Coleman. "Horses still need to eat, they need to exercise, and be cared for. Trainers and grooms have been working at the track, keeping six feet apart, wearing face coverings, and disinfecting common areas. We just want to be able to put on the show and earn a living."

People who work in the horse racing industry are paid through purses, or race winnings. The sport is labor intensive and also supports thousands of small farmers who provide grain and hay for feed and bedding.

"Training horses is a 365 day a year job. We only get to race and earn money for 92 days of live racing a year and we've already lost 25% of that. We believe we can return to racing while doing it in a safe environment," said Fairley.

A rigorous and exhaustive plan including temperature screening, face coverings, social distancing in barns and on the track, is already in place. Only the bare minimum of essential staff including trainers, grooms, drivers, and stewards will be on site.

"These essential workers are doing their jobs without pay. Let's broadcast the races so the public can wager online and small business employees can earn a living. We're ready, it's safe, let's do this," said Coleman.