

Spring Harness Racing at Shenandoah Downs in Woodstock is an Entertaining, Affordable Afternoon Activity

The charming mountain town of Woodstock, Virginia may best be known as the home base of Massanutten Military Academy --- as well as a convenient access point to spring hikes in the Shenandoah Valley and numerous area wineries. But for the second year in a row, an equine attraction will be cemented on that activity list --- harness racing at **Shenandoah Downs**.

Standardbred horses, who either pace via a sidwinding gait or trot via a diagonal gait --- as opposed to

thoroughbred racehorses who simply run or gallop --- will compete over a half mile oval every Saturday and Sunday for seven weeks from April 6 - May 19. About a dozen pari-mutuel races are scheduled each day and the action extends from 1:05 - 4:30 PM. Shenandoah Downs itself is located at the Shenandoah County Fairgrounds located halfway between Harrisonburg and Winchester and is nestled between the scenic Blue Ridge and Alleghany mountain ranges.

Unlike modern tracks such as Colonial Downs, Charles Town and Laurel that offer customer conveniences like indoor tiered dining rooms, luxurious corporate entertainment areas and simulcast centers where fans can bet horse races from any track in the country, Shenandoah Downs offers a grass roots, "throwback" type experience that harks back decades. Fans congregate in a 105-year-old grandstand that is situated literally on top of the action and cheer on their favorites as they thunder down the home stretch. The vibe provides an intimate and exciting experience for fans of all ages. All focus is on the live harness races that unfold on a state-of-the-art track that has undergone \$1.1 million in renovations and upgrades since 2016.

Talk about history and tradition. Harness racing has been held in Woodstock for 137 consecutive years. Generations



of fans and families have gathered over time to enjoy harness racing at the Shenandoah County Fair, which is held annually in late August, and most recently the 7-week long Shenandoah Downs spring and fall meets where wagering is available.

Fans in Woodstock appreciate good horsemanship. There is deep appreciation of the effort it takes to get a horse to the track, from being bred and raised, to being trained and ready for competition. Horses that finish last are often cheered as much as the winning horse that crosses first and gets its picture taken.

Never been to a horse race before? No worries. The staff at Shenandoah Downs is there to help make your visit enjoyable and hopefully profitable. For

fans that choose to wager, bets can be placed with a teller --- who can walk first timers through that process --- or via self-betting terminals. Betting is available to fans 18 years of age and older. Whether it's a basic win, place and show bet, or a more exotic wager like an exacta, trifecta or superfecta, this aspect only adds to the experience. Of course, fans can come, snag a hot dog and soft drink and simply enjoy the horsepower instead.

The rhythm of a race day is consistent, no matter when fans attend. An afternoon program is made up of a dozen races, and a race goes off every 20 minutes. Navigating the next several hours is straightforward --- handicap the race (decide on who to bet on), check the horses out as they come on to the track and parade to post, make a wager, cheer your horse on and hopefully, cash a winning ticket. Then repeat that cycle another 11 times.

Looking for a unique first date? An outing at the races is a perfect first date opportunity. You'll have something to talk about all day. Parking and admission are free and a bet can cost as little as ten cents. Past performance programs (\$3.00) and tip sheets (free) are available to help in the selection process. Feeling intimidated? Try eavesdropping on conversations going on around you. Discover why people like a certain horse in the next race. Who knows, you may find something that catches your attention and helps the handicapping process --- or not!

Attendees beware. Shenandoah Downs offers a full slate of promotions to enhance the fan experience. A local cattle farmer named Steve Wetzel entered an "Own a Horse for a Day" promotion at the track two years ago. His name was selected along with seven other winners who came back a week later where each actually got a chance to own a horse in a preselected race. Everyone got to mingle with their horse in the paddock, meet their respective driver and trainer and best of all, keep the purse money their horse earned in a \$5,250 race.

Steve's horse ended up crossing the finish line first and he took home a winner's share check in the amount of \$2,625. He was hooked from that point. Steve became so taken with the sport of harness racing that he gave up his cattle business, bought a horse farm just outside of Woodstock, purchased nine racehorses --- with guidance from experienced horsemen he developed relationships with --- and in time, got his trainers license. He ended up winning races at his home track in Woodstock, at both the County Fair and Shenandoah Downs meets, with all his family members present to share in the joy. In late January, Steve scored his first training win outside of Virginia, at Rosecroft Raceway in Maryland. The rewards have been hard earned and more chapters to this story will be written in time.

Check out all the season details at:

www.shenandoahdowns.com

