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Hoof Beats

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Southern Hospitality

Pinehurst, N.C., is the place to be in the springtime

WITH THIS BITTERLY COLD winter lying heavily upon us, the lush greenery of Pinehurst, N.C., looks like an impossible dream of warmth and hope.

On page 60 of this issue, Keith Gisser gives some tips for those looking to make the trip for this year's annual matinee, held April 6. The area will be on the national radar for golf as well, as it is hosting the U.S. Open for both men and women this June.

Down in Pinehurst, the horses and horsemen race for the sake of racing. There is no wagering; there are no purses. It's just a group of optimistic horsemen showing off their 2-year-olds before the racing wars begin later in the year.

It's a wholesome sight, almost a gentlemanly pursuit. It is racing at its purest: one horseman saying to another, "My horse is faster than yours."

Optimism, especially in the springtime, keeps this sport going. How many of you have foals on the ground, or 2-year-olds in the barn, and hold for them dreams of greatness, whether it's in the Hambletonian or the sire stakes final? This is what gets us out of bed each morning, right?

Right now we are in the "banquet season," where we all gather to honor those whose hard work—along

with a little luck and talent from their horseflesh—was rewarded. Congratulations to all the winners—both human and equine—at this year's Dan Patch Awards banquet at Dover, Del., in late February. Be sure to take some time to savor your success.

Here at *Hoof Beats*, we are optimistic, too, after seeing the support from breeders in the magazine, especially in Ohio.



There was also another bright spot in this dim season when we got a chance to visit Miami Valley Raceway for their grand opening on Feb. 7 (see page 24). There was a great crowd on hand, but unfortunately a power failure caused

them to postpone the racing until the next night. The crowd came back, however, which just goes to show how excited the folks here in Ohio are for a resurgence of harness racing.

Here's wishing you a successful foaling season and a productive training season, because as idyllic as it sounds, we would all rather be racing for the big money instead of at a matinee.



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Southern M



While you are far more likely to wager a \$20 Nassau than a \$20 exacta in Pinehurst, N.C., the bucolic town owes a great deal to both golf and harness racing. • Despite being a golfer's mecca, Pinehurst is also a harness racing landmark and home to an annual matinee (April 6 this year) that is destination racing. That intertwined history is

atinee



Pinehurst, N.C., is a
springtime racing
destination

by Keith Gisser
photos by David Nicoll

clearly evident even in the placement of the city-owned, 111-acre equine training center, which is nearly surrounded by the resort. This year Pinehurst and its eponymous resort will host both the men's and women's championships of the United States Golf Association in consecutive weeks—June 12-15 for the men and June 19-22 for the women—the first time any venue has been selected to host both events.



“I love it down here. The track’s good; the barns are nice. There’s not a nicer training center anywhere.”

Mike Medors

It will be a tall order for the village of 13,000, but the town seems ready to step up to the challenge, just as it has stepped up to the challenge of maintaining its harness racing tradition.

Located in Moore County, in the heart of the Sandhills of North Carolina, Pinehurst, and the surrounding towns of Southern Pines, Pinebluff, Whispering Pines and Aberdeen, are easily accessible from Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Raleigh. And despite its emphasis on golf and equine sports, the area has a great deal more to offer visitors, including world-class shopping, food, museums and more.

PINEHURST’S HISTORY

Pinehurst—originally named Tuftstown—was founded in 1895 by Boston entrepreneur James Walker Tufts. Best known for the American Soda Fountain Company, Tufts purchased 5,800 acres for \$1 each in order to build a resort where wealthy New Englanders could

spend a couple weeks before heading the rest of the way to Florida, where many of them wintered, and then spend a few weeks more on the way back home.

He hired Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed New York’s Central Park, to design the resort, and in 1900 he hired Donald Ross to develop the golf courses and build that business. Ross expanded the basic nine-hole course to a full layout and in 1907 he developed the iconic Pinehurst No. 2 course that will host the Open Championships. Ross designed two more courses, including No. 4, which was redesigned in 2000 by architect Tom Fazio, who also worked on several other courses at the complex.

The Tufts family held the resort privately until 1920 when they formed a corporation to protect it. In the 1960s, the resort was purchased by Diamondhead Corporation which continued to expand the complex, offering 7,000 lots, or membership units.

A RICH RACING TRADITION

In 1915, Leonard Tufts, who had succeeded James as president of the resort, welcomed Standardbreds to the Pinehurst Race Track. The facility featured 11 barns, a blacksmith shop, tack shop, fair barn, grandstand and a kitchen with dining room. It boasts a five-eighths sand and one-mile clay training track in addition to the half-mile sand/clay racetrack.

There were weekly matinees throughout the training season, the attendance of which rivaled the weekly polo matches also held at the site. Polo was first held near the mile track, but was moved to the racetrack infield so more fans could watch.

In the 1930s, the double whammy of the Great Depression and a tornado jeopardized the future of the facility, with matinees becoming less frequent and more and more horsemen shipping out earlier and earlier. Polo pretty much disappeared at that time. Today the



GOING STRONG: Harness racing has been a fixture at Pinehurst since 1915. Its annual matinee day, a remnant of the weekly events held years ago, draws thousands of fans every first Sunday in April.





“The matinee is when we say goodbye to our horsemen. They graciously hold this wonderful matinee race, putting on a show for us. It’s just a wonderful community event.”

Nancy Fiorillo

facility basically closes for Standardbreds at the end of April, although it is in use year-round.

A list of horsemen who have used Pinehurst as a staging ground reads like a Who’s Who of the sport. Frank Stafford, Del Cameron, Donnie Miller and Vic Fleming are just a few. They prepped horses including 1954 Hambletonian champ Newport Dream, 1965 Hambo winner Egyptian Candor and 1967 Hambletonian victor Speedy Streak.

From 1947-’51, Pinehurst produced three Little Brown Jug champs: Forbes Chief in 1947, Knight Dream in 1948, and the appropriately named Tar Heel (North Carolina is the Tar Heel state) in 1951. These were truly the glory days of the track, which is located at 200 Beulah Hill Road South.

The track lost several barns to fire in the mid-1960s, including the historic Polo Barn, and the old grandstand was condemned due to a termite infestation. The track, which Pinehurst Resort leased to the Pinehurst Harness Drivers and Trainers Association in 1950 for a 40-year term at \$1 per year, came to a crossroads at that end of the lease.

“It was a valuable piece of property, but it was important enough for our little village to keep,” said Pinehurst Mayor Nancy Fiorillo. “Not many villages could do this, purchasing a highly desirable development property and keeping it as a training center. It was important to us.

“This is the place you take your friends to. The track restaurant is one of the most popular breakfast spots in the village, even for non-horse people (in fact

it was the favorite stop of former United States Golf Association chief David Fay, who was a driving force to bringing the U.S. Open doubleheader to Pinehurst). It’s smack dab in the middle of the resort. It’s surreal. These great trainers, we can get so close to them and interact with them. They are a great part of the community.”

The facility is now municipally owned and recently added an open-air arena in the infield, allowing it to host horse shows and even more events.

Ohio horseman Mike Medors has trained at Pinehurst for nearly 20 years and wouldn’t even think of going anywhere else for winter training.

“I love it down here,” he said. “The track’s good; the barns are nice. There’s not a nicer training center anywhere.



And the weather is like springtime; it can get a bit chilly in the morning, but it warms up well. And the track crew, they're good. They take care of the track and they do what needs to be done. No hassles. It's a great place to go."

Team Ackerman, consisting of father Doug and son D.R., has been at Pinehurst for six years.

"They closed Del Mar to training and this was the best situation for us," said D.R. "We head down right after the sales and we are there until mid-April."

PICTURESQUE: Boston entrepreneur J.W. Tufts founded Pinehurst as a stopping point for wealthy New Englanders traveling to and from Florida, and the town still retains its New England charm. *Clockwise from top:* Cyclists enjoy the laid-back atmosphere. • The Red Door is just one of several quaint eateries in the area. • Green Gate Olive Oils offers gourmet olive oils and balsamic vinegars to cooking enthusiasts.

Ackerman also likes the area for its off-track amenities.

"There's the golf, of course, and the food is good, not just in Pinehurst, but if you head down to Southern Pines," he said. "There are chains, there are local places, you name it. It's just a great place and they treat us very well."

The winter training season at Pinehurst culminates with the annual spring matinee, the last remnant of the weekly events held years ago. But this matinee, traditionally held on the first

Sunday of April, is like no other.

“The matinee is when we say good-bye to our horsemen,” said Fiorillo. “They graciously hold this wonderful matinee race, putting on a show for us. There’s tailgating, picnics, food trucks; it’s just a wonderful community event.”

And this is no normal matinee. Each race of 2-year-olds is sponsored by a particular stable, with nothing more than bragging rights at stake. But the horsemen put on a great show for the thousands in attendance. They begin gathering at 10 a.m. for the 1 p.m. opening ceremony, with a first post of 1:30.

The crowd runs the gamut from fami-

lies pushing strollers to multimillionaire snowbirds to horse owners and their families. It’s a festive atmosphere, accessible to all, as the tailgating shows. This is no simple “sausage and burgers on the grill” party. Many folks with reserved areas bring in catered feasts, others offer potlucks that are just as likely to offer smoked salmon and shrimp as they are wings and wieners.

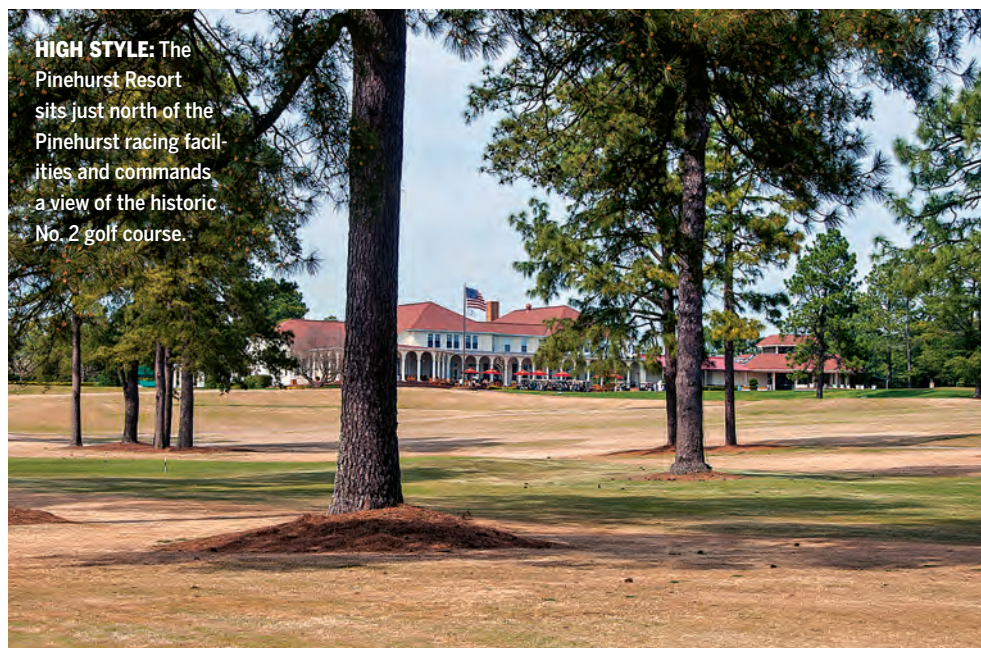
“People enjoy it,” Ackerman said. “It allows us to show that harness racing is a viable business and they see that we support the community and they, in turn, support us, so we give back with the matinee.”

This year, Pinehurst will also host USTA charted qualifiers on Wednesday, April 9, at 10 a.m.

THEN THERE’S THE GOLF

The Pinehurst area offers nearly three dozen courses. Pinehurst No. 2 is intimidating, even to the pros, but the resort’s courses feature a wide range of challenges for golfers of any skill level. Pinehurst No. 3 is just 5,682 yards and, although it features tight fairways, it offers seven par-4s that are 350 yards or less, making it accessible to anyone.

While Pinehurst has hosted the U.S. Open in the past (1999 and 2005), this will



HIGH STYLE: The Pinehurst Resort sits just north of the Pinehurst racing facilities and commands a view of the historic No. 2 golf course.

Forbes Travel Guide.

Two notable lodging options are smack dab in the middle of the historic district.

The Pinecrest Inn (www.pinecrestinnpinehurst.com), which recently turned 100 years old, is also notable for its dining, particularly its award-winning 22-ounce pork chop! The 115-year-old **Magnolia Inn** (www.themagnoliainn.com) is a boutique-type option, with just 10 rooms, but there is a formal dining room and a pub.

Off the Links

If you are not a golfer, Pinehurst still has plenty to offer. There is a day-long pottery tour, with stops at many of the two dozen potteries in

Moore County, which Mayor Fiorillo said are a “must see.”

The village website, www.vopnc.org, provides a walking tour of the historic district, including the non-profit Given Memorial Library and Tufts Archives, which is not just a library, but a museum, and the redeveloped Pinehurst Department Store. If time permits, check out the 35-acre Village Arboretum on Magnolia Drive.

Keith McDaniel, who operates Green Gate Olive Oils and Gourmet, is the president of the Pinehurst Business Guild. He speaks, as most do, of the village itself as a destination.

“It never lost that New England feel,” he said. “So many of us are from other places and transplanted here that we don’t take it for granted. If I had to pick one place, the Given Library would be it. It’s just so full of history.”

Marty McKenzie, a rare native Pinehurst resident, is a real estate developer and president of the Olmsted Village Company. He is the son of a former manager of the harness

When You Visit

Lodging

The Pinehurst Resort (www.pinehurst.com) offers luxurious lodging options, and rooms and condos are typically available during matinee weekend, which is before the peak golf season.

The 230 rooms of the historic **Carolina Inn**, dubbed the “White House of Golf,” will transport you back in time.

The Holly Inn features rocking chairs in each guest suite and a library. The rumor is that the ghost of Mr. Holly himself, who died when he fell from a tree while picking persimmons, roams the halls.

The Manor Inn, with its 42 rooms, features modern amenities including flat screen TVs and Wi-Fi.

The Spa at Pinehurst is a modern continuation of Tufts’ plans for the resort and has been awarded four stars by

be its first time hosting the Women's Open, which has been held at nearby Pine Needles in Southern Pines three times (1996, 2001, 2007). The back-to-back schedule creates some unique challenges and benefits, according to the USGA's Senior Director for U.S. Open Championships, Reginald Jones Jr., who has been working for the USGA for nearly 20 years.

"The Women's Championship typically has its own support staff, so from that standpoint, holding the two tournaments back-to-back is not a problem," he said. "But we will begin registering players on Sunday for the women's tournament, while the final round of the

Open is being played, so we will need more volunteers. There will also be some logistics issues as the men move out and the women move in. Usually, we need about 5,000 volunteers and the Women's Open needs about 3,000. We have a total of 6,200 and almost 75 percent are doing both weeks. We have volunteers from all 50 states and from 12 countries."

Condos and hotels have been booked solid for more than a year leading up to the tournaments, but there are plenty of opportunities the rest of the year, according to Don "Skip" Hoover, a USTA District 1 director, whose horses are trained by Medors. It's even easier if you combine

your trip with a little harness action.

"We are down there in the non-peak time; even the matinee weekend is early April," he said. "That makes it pretty easy to get on the courses, even at the resort. There are plenty of chances for anyone to play at any level. It can be chilly in the winter, and there isn't a lot of light, so if the horses aren't done training until 1 p.m., you might have to rush to get 18 in. But it's a nice, relaxing trip no matter when we go."

Keith Gisser is a freelance writer living in Ohio. | To comment on this story, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

track, which gives him a unique perspective on the community's available attractions. In addition to the arboretum, he recommends the Sandhills Horticultural Center.

"These fabulously beautiful gardens exemplify our heritage," he said. "They are located on the grounds of Sandhill's Community College and represent the quality of the people who have lived and live in our community that contribute to assets like these gardens."

Dining

If golfing, walking and shopping build up an appetite, the Pinehurst region serves up just about anything you want. As mentioned, many of the hotels include breakfast in their room rates or golf packages, but the go-to breakfast spot in town is the harness track's kitchen.

"As far as I know, there has been a restaurant on our race-track grounds since day one," said McKenzie. "When I was a kid, the lady that owned and operated the restaurant was Mary. Back in those days, most all the grooms lived in the barns and she provided a weekly offering where the grooms paid her for three meals a day for seven days.

"And, now even though very few trainers or drivers or grooms live on the grounds, the track restaurant continues to operate and has become a

favorite place for locals to eat breakfast and lunch. The price is right, the food is down-home Southern cooking, and it is a treat to be there and listen to the horsemen talk about all their races during their season."

For lunch, the **Villager Deli Restaurant** (known as "The Deli") is a classic New York-style deli in a non-classic New York setting. It features an outdoor veranda and is located in the redeveloped Pinehurst Department Store building, which also houses offices and other shops.

Elliot's on Linden (www.elliottsonlinden.com) is a farm-to-table concept restaurant whose chef and owner, Mark Elliot, began his career in southeast England. While farm-to-table is a recent dining trend, it is exactly what Tufts did when he founded the resort. He established a farm which provided

most of the food for guests.

"If you look at the population here and in the surrounding communities, we would not be able to support all these chains," said Fiorillo. "But because of golf and the other events, you can find anything you want within 15 minutes. Plus we are a big draw from the nearby rural communities."

The Mayor's personal favorites include the **The Holly Inn**; **Southern Prime**, a steakhouse in Southern Pines; **Kurt's Cucina**, an Italian eatery; and the **Ironwood Café** (www.ironwoodpinehurst.com).



GOOD EATS: The popular Villager Deli Restaurant in downtown Pinehurst is a classic New York-style deli.

Located on Midland Road, the Ironwood offers an extensive wine list, including many by the glass. It offers light fare including an excellent salmon salad, but also hearty American dishes including cider-braised beef short ribs.

There are plenty of great ethnic-themed options in addition to Kurt's Cucina. They include the unassuming **Thai Orchid** in Aberdeen on US1, and **La Poblanita**, also in Aberdeen, for Mexican fare.

And, if you are still hungry, check out **Too Blonde Tavern** (www.tooblondetavern.com) featuring comfort food with a twist including shrimp and grits, which tastes far better than it may sound to some.