

# Laurel Park's Preakness may be short-lived

BY JOEY CAPPELLETTI  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAUREL, Md. — The crowds that once packed Laurel Park dressed in their best to watch champions like Secretariat and Seabiscuit have long since disappeared. For one final weekend, they are coming back.

Grandstands that typically sit empty will again fill with patrons in tailored suits, flowing dresses and stylish hats as Laurel Park hosts the Preakness Stakes on Saturday, the second leg of horse racing's Triple Crown. It will be the first time the track has hosted the race and is a final chapter of sorts, with racing expected to end next year before the property is converted into a training facility.

"It's going to be a really special day," said jockey Sheldon Russell, who will ride hometown horse Taj Mahal — trained by his wife, Brittany Russell — at the couple's longtime home track. "It's kind of sad because they're going to get this moment in the spotlight on their way out."

Founded in 1911, Laurel is the latest of many storied racetracks to close in recent decades as attendance dwindles and gambling increasingly moves online.

To the people who still spend their days there, the loss goes beyond the betting window.

"The actual event is what we have," said longtime Maryland trainer Ferris Allen. "The gambling dollar can be put into a slot machine, put on a roulette wheel. It can be put on a crap table. But the pageantry and the majesty of the race horse, you can't get that out of a casino."

## THE PEOPLE WHO STAYED

Laurel has served as everything from a World War I military camp to a stop for rock legends like Led Zeppelin. Its signature races, including the Washington International and Laurel Futurity, once drew celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor. It's a rich history the Laurel Historical Society is using to highlight with an exhibit this month.

Bob DiPietro remembers what it looked like growing up.

"You would go to Laurel on a Saturday and find thousands of people," said DiPietro, who served as Laurel's mayor from 1978 to 1986. "Men were in suits. Women were dressed to the nines. And you went there to have a great time from 12 o'clock to 6 o'clock."



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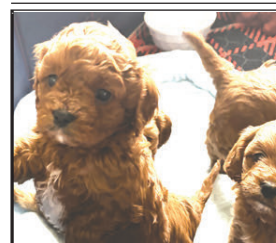
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