

History of

RILLITO PARK

In 1953, Rillito Park in Tucson – then known as the finest Quarter Horse track in the country – added a five-eighth-mile oval to accommodate Thoroughbred racing. Over time, many nationally and internationally renowned Thoroughbred greats started out at Rillito, with multiple KY-Derby winner and Hall-of-Fame trainer Bob Baffert and the jockey brothers Angel and Milo Valenzuela the most famous among them.

Initially called Rillito Downs Racetrack, the facility served as experimentation field for original owners J. Rukin Jelks and Melvin H. Haskell. It was the first to offer a three-eighth-mile straightaway, a layout that later became known as the “chute-system,” creating a standard for modern-day Quarter Horse racing.

Another innovation to become the standard for the entire industry world-wide also originated at Rillito: Jelks and Haskell were the first to use an photo-electric timer system by combining a high-speed clock with a movie camera at the finish line, thus creating the method of photo-finish to determine the winners of each race.



In addition, Haskell also experimented with grading races, weighted handicaps, futurities, derbies and stakes races, and all these concepts would greatly influence the entire world of horse racing. Honoring these achievements in 1996, the American Quarter Horse Association dedicated a Historical Marker to Rillito Park.

<http://siteexec.agha.com:80/foundation/education/historicalmarkers.html>

These significant contributions to the development of Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing inspired two non-profit organizations, the Pima County Horsemen’s Association, and Save Historic Rillito Race Track, to pursue the site’s introduction into the National Register of Historic Places. In November 2011, Rillito Park’s application has been accepted and now awaits approval by the National Historic Society.

<http://www.pimacountyattractions.com/Attractions/Rillito.html>

