



A Day at the Races

Bear Creek Downs

written by **Emily McCluhan** • photos by **Merv Coleman**

The strap on my jersey is bugging the heck out of me today. She always puts it on a little too tight, but that's probably because I've mastered the art of squirming my way out of it. At least I'm not as bad as Arnold Schwartzhogar. He's the one who somehow manages to get the strap tied up around his hoof every time. Then he hops around on three legs looking like a fool. He's definitely no competition. It's Sausageawea that I'm worried about today because I know she's been doing extra laps around the pen at night. But what's this? I look over and see her limping toward the side of the track. She's obviously trying to hide an injury; perhaps a pulled hammy? One of the girls notices and starts to lead her off the track with ol' Sausage squealing in protest the whole way. Could this be my lucky day?

We're led to the gates and the nerves really kick in. The deck up above is crowded with the summer tourists pointing at us through the dusty haze. I can barely hear their shouts of "Come on, Number Two!" and "Let's go, Number Five," because I'm focused on that trough of fireweed at the finish line, like an oasis in the middle of a desolate mud pit.

Pits sounds the trumpets and in a blur, the bell rings, the gate lifts and we're off! Cole Porker edges me to the outside on the first turn but I'm able to cut back in on the back stretch. I stride it out past Ozzie Ozboar and Nota Hot Dog around the curve. Bruce Pigsteen is in my sights as we near the finish line. I stretch my short legs and it's a snout-and-snout finish. I'm sure I've bested him. We wait for Pits to make the call. ... "The Number Four pig, Boss Hawg, takes the race!" That's me! For a moment, a brief moment, I relish my first victory — and then it's off to the trough and my sweet reward!

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At the finish line racers eagerly await their delicious reward of Fireweed after each race.

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The Starting Line

When Pits and Lynn DeArmond moved to Bearcreek, Mont., from Wyoming in 1982, they had no idea that less than 10 years later they would not only be running the only pig races in the state, but they would also be taking on the Montana State Legislature and the Board of Horse Racing.

"We moved up here from Wyoming and knew we wanted to get into a business," says Pits, also known as Bob to very few people. "So we stopped in and talked to the owner and decided to buy." He says this nonchalantly about his stumble onto one of two businesses in a town of, at that time, 50 people.

When forest fires hit Yellowstone in 1988, business slowed in Bearcreek, a town seven miles away from Red Lodge, so Pits had to get creative. "We raced iguanas on the stage inside for awhile," he says. Gerbils and hamsters didn't draw the crowds, so the outdoor "arena" was built outside for pig racing in 1989.

The Race

Originally, patrons could pick a pig to put their money on, similar to a horse race. But in 1991, state authorities got wind of the activities at Bear Creek Downs and a legal battle ensued.

"They sent in plainclothes deputies to gather evidence. But let me tell you, they needed to work on their undercover skills," Pits jokes. And a little free publicity didn't hurt either.

The state told the DeArmonds they had to have a license for the type of betting they were doing on the races. "We went to the Board of Horse Racing, but they wouldn't give us a racing license," Pits explains. The reason? "We didn't have jockey insurance."

Lucky for Pits, a few of the legislators at the time had been to the races and had enjoyed themselves, and in 1992, Alvin Ellis introduced the infamous HB433 — the pig-racing bill.

After four months and many entertaining days in Helena lobbying for his bill, victory finally came. Pits had to work

in a few specifics though. “The animal-rights people weren’t going to let all animals be bet on, so we narrowed it down to pigs, gerbils and hamsters,” he explains. “It can also only be in towns of less than 100 people.”

The state required one more stipulation, since the activities dealt with gambling. After the payout and overhead, the remaining profits had to be donated to a charity. The DeArmonds chose a scholarship fund for Carbon County high school students who are involved in 4-H or Future Farmers of America. To date, the pig races have raised over \$69,000 for the fund.

The Win

With the specifics nailed out, Pits and Lynn set up the Bear Creek Downs for success and have been attracting attention ever since. In the last 13 years, the pig races have been featured on “Good Morning America,” Fuji TV in Japan, the Discovery Channel and, soon, MTV. Gourmet

Magazine and The Wall Street Journal have also gotten in on the action.

To comply with state laws, the betting has changed. Two dollars buys you a square on a sports pool-style board. Numbers are drawn at random before each race, so don’t even think about fixing a race around your favorite porker. The excitement in the crowd lining the deck above the track is electric. And when your pig crosses the finish line in first, winning \$25 never felt so good.

The Saloon

During the winter season, patrons can stay toasty inside the Bear Creek Saloon & Steakhouse and still satisfy their pig-betting urges leftover from the summer.

“We race the baby pigs on the stage inside during the winter,” says Pits. The piglets are five weeks old when they make their racing debut. “We race them for three weeks then give them back. They are just growing so fast at that age,” he explains.

Diners will also enjoy an award-winning selection of steaks, burgers, chicken or shrimp year-round in the Saloon — but don’t even think of asking for a pork chop. Dinner is served Thursday through Sunday in the summer and Friday through Sunday in the winter. ■



Left: Bob "Pits" DeArmond carries one of the racers to the starting line. **Below:** Spectators leap to their feet and cheer for their favorite pig.



For a squealing good time, check out the pig races at Bear Creek Downs: Thursday through Sunday from Memorial Day through Labor Day; and Fridays and Saturdays in the Saloon December through March. Bearcreek, Mont. is located 8 miles east of Red Lodge on Highway 308.