

## Long history

# Trots a popular winter event

by Cynthia Ross

What's the number one spectator sport in North America? Believe it or not, baseball, football and hockey combined don't draw as many fans as -- harness racing!

Harness racing is not just a spring-summer-fall activity in Canada. It continues right through the winter months at many tracks across the country.

For those who haven't considered it before, where else could you go for an evening's entertainment alone, with a date or the whole family for only a couple of dollars' admission per person?

Many racetracks offer a dining room as well as a licensed lounge and snack bar. Protected from the elements and cosy inside, you can watch the races through glass and (at most tracks) on TV monitors.

Rugged types can wrap up and sit right outside, and then dash inside for a warmup after each race, which lasts only a little over two minutes.

### Year 'round fun

You'll probably want to do a bit of each. There's a stimulating close-to-the-action feeling right up at the fence, with a good view of the horses and all the sounds of the track.

The drivers will be well wrapped themselves. They wear a sort of snowmobile suit in their own colors, snowmobile boots and masks with ear and neck protectors. Cold hands are a problem not entirely solved by down-lined ski gloves, and so the drivers may have someone else parade their horses before the race.

The horses wear the same saddle cloths year 'round -- the exercise keeps them warm (a cross-country skier will understand) -- but their footgear changes slightly. Winter shoes are equipped with boron calkins or "calks" for grip on hard slippery surfaces.

Weather conditions may be bad, but cancellations are surprisingly rare. Freezing rain or cold may occasionally have stopped the races but more likely than not a power breakdown has been the cause.

For the uninitiated a bit of background....

### Hopples control stride

The sulky or race bike is a streamlined item of aircraft aluminum, usually commercially manufactured. The rubber tires go on spoked wheels, and are required to have clear or colored plastic discs over the spokes during races.

You'll notice that in some races the horses have loops on the legs of one side connected with a strap. These loops or hopples (pronounced "hobbles") control the stride pattern so that the left legs move together and the right legs move together. These are the pacers. They usually fill eight to nine of a standard 10-race program.

In contrast, the trotters have a diagonal gait, the left hind leg moving with the right front. Trotters require more breeding, more training and are consequently more expensive.

### Interesting as you go

As with most things the more you know, the more interesting it becomes. Michel Corbeil had never been to the races when he got a free pass with a stereo he bought. He went, then went back occasionally and then more often. "I'd come home with more money than I'd left with."

After a while, considering that the horses were making more money than he was, he

went out and bought some horses. One thing led to another and eventually he became general manager of the racetrack at Jonquiere, Quebec, and now is director of publicity for the Canadian Trotting Association.

### 'A family affair'

Again and again this aspect of the sport turns up -- how accessible and involving it is. According to Margaret Neal, historian for the Canadian Trotting Association, one man who got into standardbred (harness) racing said that right from the start he felt that he "belonged." "In fact," she said, "it often becomes a family affair."

Being open to all has characterized harness racing in Canada since the beginning. In the Old World, a good horse was a luxury, in Canada, a necessity because of the distances.

### Leisure sport

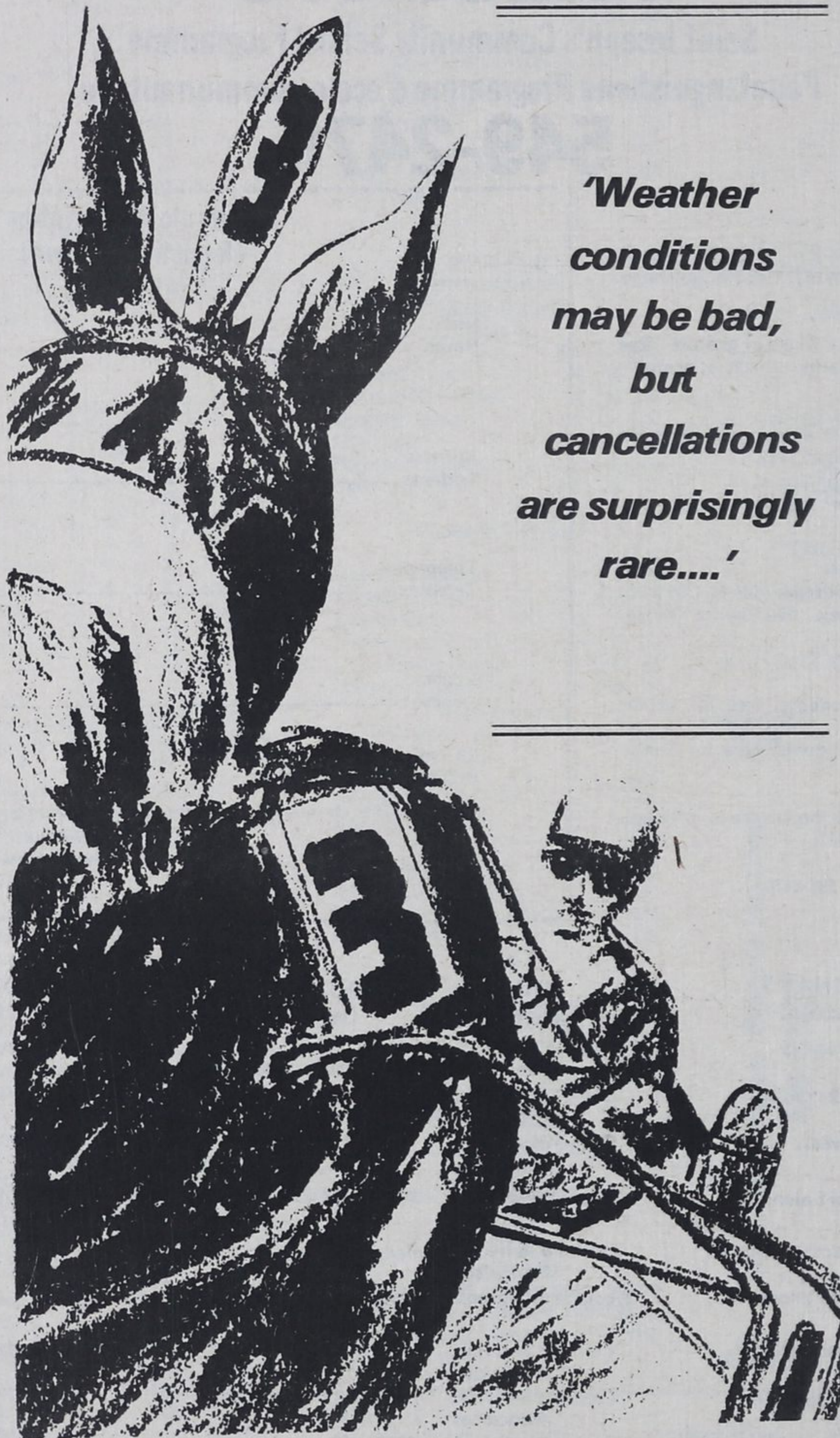
A fast horse became a matter of pride, and people would challenge each other to a friendly race on the way home from school or town or church. Farmer had more leisure time in winter and would get together for the entertainment of it all and race on Sundays. (As early as 1708 a Quebec City ordinance stated people were not to trot or gallop their horses within 10 arpents (that would be about

three-fifths of a kilometer or a little over one-third of a mile) of leaving church, racing having apparently become a little too popular.)

Many people now in the business remember watching ice-racing in their childhood. Although the Depression and World War II pretty nearly finished it, ice racing hangs on on the North River in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, when conditions permit -- most years through January and February.

It was picked up again in 1979 in Ottawa, with the first Canadian Club Classic ice race on the Rideau Canal. That year it was one event out of many during Winterlude, the capital's 10-day winter carnival. In 1981 over 50,000 people watched the third Canadian Club Classic, many from out of the country. Nine of North America's best drivers competed for the Canadian Club Cup.

Regular winter harness racing takes place on standard tracks, cleared of snow. It is probably strongest in Ontario, with 12 year-round harness racing tracks, but is also strong in Quebec and the Maritimes, and growing fast in British Columbia and Alberta.



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## SPORTSCENE

● Cont'd from pg. 18

### Sunday

Georgian Bay Junior C

—Oro 77's vs. Midland Centennials, 7:30 p.m.

—Huntsville Huskies vs. Penetanguishene Kings, 7:30 p.m.

Recreational

—Commodore Hotel vs. Pollard's Refrigeration, 9:30 a.m.

—Tilson TV vs. Chalet Sports, 10:45 a.m.

—Hindson Marine vs. Dock Lunch, 12 noon

Midland Minor Hockey Major Bantam

—Collingwood vs. Midland Jaycees, 5:30 p.m.

### Monday

HOCKEY Midland

Recreational

—Duggans Polar Kings vs. Olympia Sports, 8 p.m.

—Performance Motor Sports vs. North Stars, 9:15 p.m.

—Roadrunners vs. Hebner's Taxi, 10:30 p.m.

## Pen Twin Theatres

#1 BO DEREK Wed. to Sat. Jan. 13-14-15-16

Pen RICHARD HARRIS 7pm 9 pm AA

TARZAN ROGER MOORE, JAMES BOND 007 FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Sat. Matinee 1:30 Held over CINDERELLA

Sun. - Mon. - Tues. Jan. 17-18-19 7:15

CHERRY HILL HIGH Also HOTT SHIRTS

Fri. - Sat. Jan 15-16

Pen Held Over 7:15 CINDERELLA CONDOORMAN

#2 Sun. to Thurs Jan. 17 to 21 7 & 9 pm RICH and FAMOUS

## Snow a hit

Snow blowing across Heritage Drive in Midland at around 1 p.m. Sunday was the cause of one of the few weekend accidents to occur here.

Leo Charlebois, 45, of William Street, Victoria Harbour, westbound, slowed when he found himself driving into a snow whiteout. Donald Dahmer, 61, of Balm Beach, also westbound as well, behind Charlebois, struck his vehicle from the rear, police said.

No charges were laid; no injuries resulted.

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Next Jan. 21, 22, 23

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