

MARCH 2018

# TDN WEEKEND

HEAVENLY  
HOPPEGARTEN  
is GERMANY'S  
UNDISCOVERED JEWEL

NEW BREEDERS' CUP  
CHAIRMAN **FRED  
HERTRICH**  
IS NO LONGER  
UNDER THE RADAR

**OCALA's**  
FIELDS OF DREAMS

WEST POINT'S  
**TERRY  
FINLEY**  
HAS THE  
LAST WORD

# HOPPE

TDN *Destinations*

# GAR TEN

## RACING'S UNDISCOVERED JEWEL

By SUE FINLEY

Picture the perfect day of racing. For most of us, that's easy. For me, it's Saratoga, circa 1984. There's a good-sized crowd on hand—enough to make you feel like you're in a place where something is happening—but not so much that it's oppressive. You find a parking spot in the lot, make your way up to the casually elegant, historic wooden stands, and buy yourself a seat. Or maybe you've brought a picnic, so you sit out on the lawn, handicapping with your family by the leafy green paddock, watching the jockeys head to the tree that has the number of their horse nailed to it, after being

summoned by the traditional bell. You get in line, and while you're far from alone, you can still make your bet with two minutes to post, and whether your horse is first or last, you cheer and clap politely as the winner returns to the circle.

While the charm of the 1984 Saratoga that I remember inevitably had to give way to more accommodations, pavement, food stands, a lack of parking and crowds—gave way, in fact, to its own success—that idyllic racing experience exists, or something awfully close to it, in Hoppegarten, just outside of Berlin, Germany. It's a jewel of a racecourse, brought back from the oblivion, and it provided me what was easily my most enjoyable day of racing in 2017.





It's October 3 and the crowd is in a festive mood. I'm thinking it's an unbelievable crowd for a Tuesday afternoon, until someone points out that it's a national holiday, German Unity Day, the celebration of the day, 27 years earlier, when East and West Germany reunified. We spend most of the day in the Klub stand, a tall, wooden three-story structure with a buffet area and outdoor seat-

ing. It's lovely without being too terribly glamorous; the men are in suits and the women are smartly attired, but they're primarily owners and breeders, and it's clear they love their racing.

It rains a bit off and on, but the place is comfortably full—not crazy-packed, so you can't find a place to sit or stand—but full of happy families, picnicking together on the

lawn, most of whom seem to have brought their dogs. I had never seen dogs at a racetrack, even in France, but here it must be a tradition because there are hundreds of them, literally. They're all well-behaved, big and small, watching the horses take a turn in the paddock without so much as a bark. There are regular people, and elegant people; ice cream stands and champagne, all

combined so harmoniously together that it's as if everyone took some sort of happy drug. It occurs to me that it's been a long time since I've seen so many people having such a good time at the races.

Hoppegarten crossed my radar for the first time when the New York Racing Association entered into a three-year partnership with the German track in March of 2017, pledging

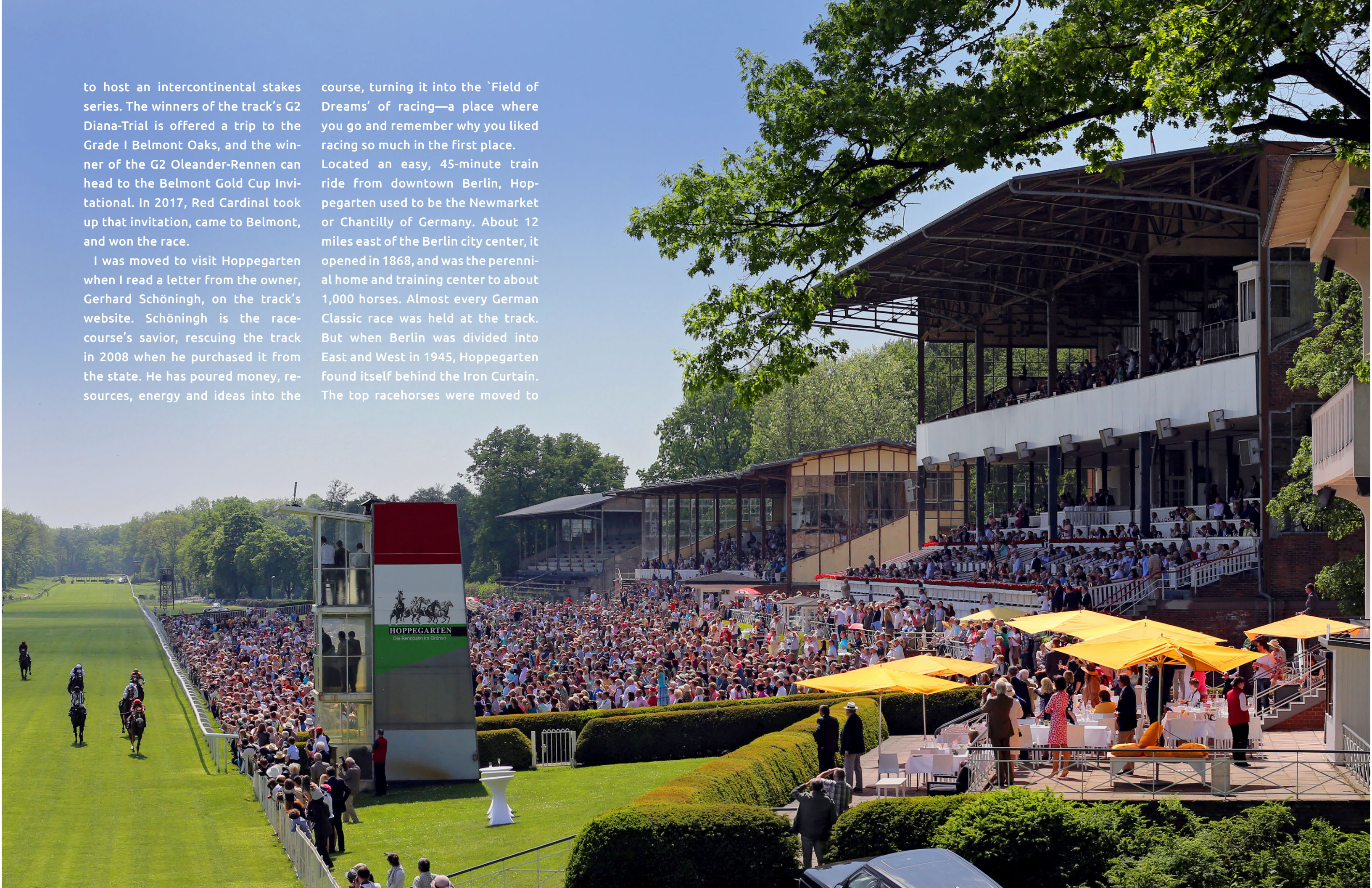


to host an intercontinental stakes series. The winners of the track's G2 Diana-Trial is offered a trip to the Grade I Belmont Oaks, and the winner of the G2 Oleander-Rennen can head to the Belmont Gold Cup Invitational. In 2017, Red Cardinal took up that invitation, came to Belmont, and won the race.

I was moved to visit Hoppegarten when I read a letter from the owner, Gerhard Schöningh, on the track's website. Schöningh is the racecourse's savior, rescuing the track in 2008 when he purchased it from the state. He has poured money, resources, energy and ideas into the

course, turning it into the 'Field of Dreams' of racing—a place where you go and remember why you liked racing so much in the first place.

Located an easy, 45-minute train ride from downtown Berlin, Hoppegarten used to be the Newmarket or Chantilly of Germany. About 12 miles east of the Berlin city center, it opened in 1868, and was the perennial home and training center to about 1,000 horses. Almost every German Classic race was held at the track. But when Berlin was divided into East and West in 1945, Hoppegarten found itself behind the Iron Curtain. The top racehorses were moved to







West Germany, and two million West Berliners found themselves unable to visit the track. Throughout the communist era, racing continued to be held, but private ownership of horses was discouraged, and there ensued a steady decline of horses, fans and of the facilities.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1990, an initial euphoria ensued in Berlin, but it soon became clear that

to a non-racing family. "To this day, it's lost on my mother what I like about racing," he said. "But my parents made the mistake of moving house when I was seven, literally right next to the racecourse in my hometown." He was hooked.

Schöningh went to university in the U.K., at Bristol, and found he enjoyed that country's excellent racing. He settled in London, co-found-

---

**"WHEREVER  
RACING IS DONE  
WELL, IT APPEALS  
TO ALL SPHERES  
IN SOCIETY."**

not only would the city's economic problems take a while to repair, but the racecourse's would, too. Fifteen years after reunification, Hoppegarten was still languishing, and it would require more than an infusion of cash to turn the place around, but someone with the passion, energy and foresight to do so. It found that in Schöningh.

The 56 year-old Schöningh grew up in Krefeld, Germany, near Cologne,

ed a fund management boutique which he says, "did quite well." In 2006, he sold it, and was considering starting another company when a friend said to him, 'by the way, have you heard that the government in Germany is privatizing Hoppegarten Racecourse?'

"Because I had little to do at the time," continued Schöningh, "I thought, great, that sounds interesting. Why not order the documentation? It was



purely out of curiosity.” There were a lot of positive signs in the report.

“The fascinating thing to me was firstly that the hardware was pretty well preserved. There was a huge investment backlog, obviously, but I thought it had great charm. Secondly, it’s a great racing surface built on ideal subsoil.” Just after the fall of the wall, Berlin experienced a post-reunification euphoria, said Schöningh, “but by 1993 or 94 people realized that economic recovery wouldn’t happen so quickly and prices collapsed. By 2006 or 2007, Berlin was probably at rock bottom and there was a lot of disillusionment.”

Into that environment stepped Schöningh, who saw the growth po-

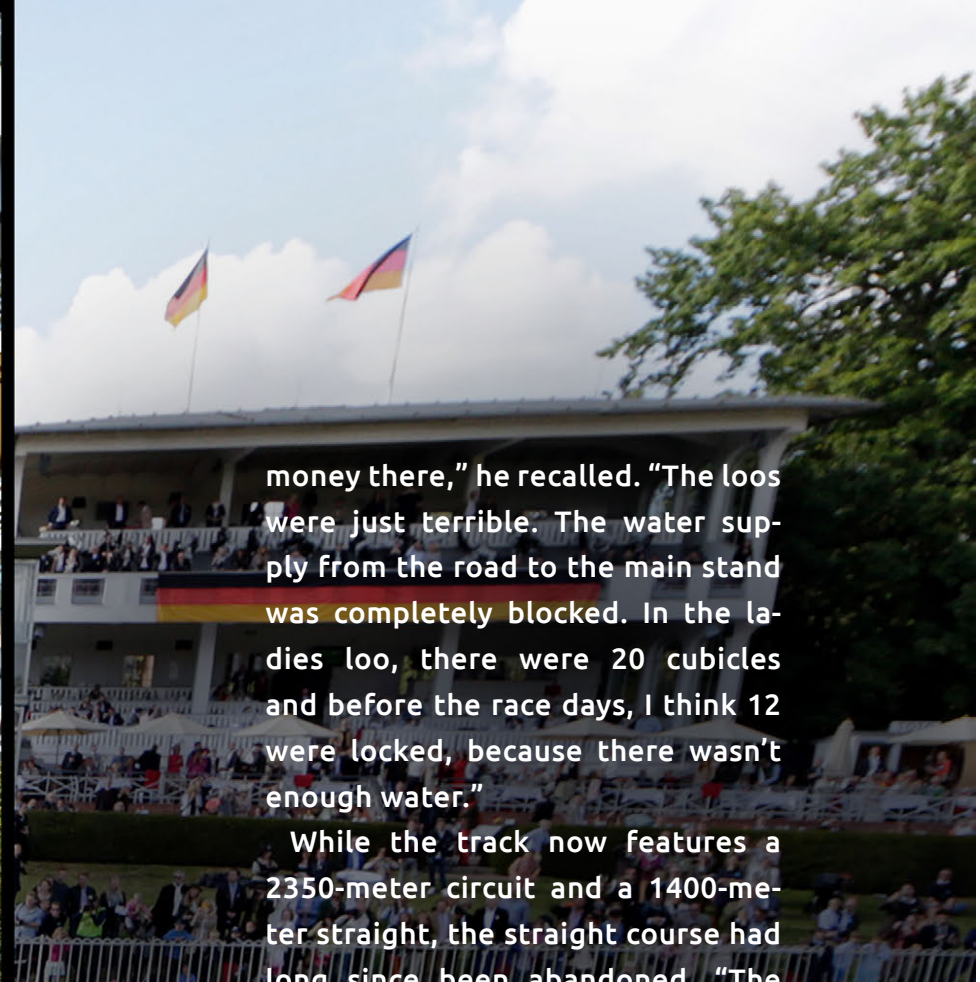
tential in a track in a metropolitan area growing by a net 80 to 100,000 people per year. “I thought if there’s a place in Germany where a race-track has potential, it’s in Berlin, which was the emerging capitol if everything goes right.”

He spent 3 million euros on the initial purchase, and has poured that number into it several times over, repairing and rebuilding stands, upgrading crumbling hospitality; even making the bathrooms work again.

“When I arrived, we had terrible hospitality areas with grubby chairs. It was not state-of-the-art and it was incredibly important that we had adequate facilities in order to find partners who were willing to spend







money there," he recalled. "The loos were just terrible. The water supply from the road to the main stand was completely blocked. In the ladies loo, there were 20 cubicles and before the race days, I think 12 were locked, because there wasn't enough water."

While the track now features a 2350-meter circuit and a 1400-meter straight, the straight course had long since been abandoned. "The

sight lines from the stands were completely covered in trees that had grown there since the war," he said. "When you were in the grandstand, you couldn't see the horses on the straight track and so we felled a huge number

of trees, against a lot of resistance from environmentalists and people who said, 'oh, he just wants to build houses there.' I said no, I just want to turn this into a professional racecourse. If at the Olympic Stadium, tall bushes or trees grew behind the goal, everyone would understand that they block the spectators' sight lines. That's

"AT A PLACE LIKE HOPPEGARTEN, YOU ARE REALLY A CURATOR OF AN OLD INSTITUTION, Hoping to make it relevant to people of this age and to hand it on in the best shape possible."





exactly what I'm trying to do here."

But it was important to Schöningh to keep the integrity of the place intact. It offers historic buildings, panoramic views and an expanse of green in a serene setting. One of the most refreshing things about Hoppegarten is the mix of racegoers. A beer garden and bratwurst station in back, a lawn for picnicking on the grandstand apron, an old Klub stand for members, trackside hospitality for diners, and old-fashioned grandstand seats. A wander through the

racecourse finds them all being enjoyed; children run around, families spread blankets, women in the Klub stand wear elegant clothes and fascinators. And they all run marvelously together.

"A standard question I got from people, particularly when I arrived in Berlin from people knowing about my UK background, was, 'ah, do you want to turn it into Royal Ascot?' And I always said, 'no.' When you look at this racecourse and the stands, they are all from 1922. The



Klub stand was always the smallest, and then the grandstand for the well-to-do and then three further enclosures down the track. When you do the numbers, historically, you always had normal people, not very wealthy people, who formed the vast majority of the guests at Hoppegarten. Wherever racing is done well, it appeals to all spheres in society and what I want, ideally, is that Hoppegarten represents Berlin in all its diversity as best as possible. Of course, we need VIPs and ladies in hats, but I get great pleasure in seeing families, or seeing students, or people who dress well, but who have bought their clothes from Zara or someplace similar. And so it's very important to me that it's accessible. I think people like it.



FOR RESERVATIONS or to inquire about accommodations at Hoppegarten, contact Carina Fassbender at [cf@hoppegarten.com](mailto:cf@hoppegarten.com) +49 3342 389335.

## 2018 FIXTURE DATES:

Easter Sunday, 1 April

Saturday, 21 April

Sunday, 22 April

Whit Sunday, 20 May

Saturday, 9 June

Sunday, 10 June

Wednesday, 25 July

### GRAND PRIX FESTIVAL MEETING

Saturday, 11 August

Sunday, 12 August

Wednesday, 3 October

Sunday, 7 October



It's a reflection of Berlin."

Schöningh has formed marketing partnerships with Berlin radio stations, started Skype press conferences with leading jockeys and trainers who are coming to ride in upcoming races, and signed up sponsors. He has almost doubled the number of horses permanently stabled at the training facility, and plans to target more trainers in the

future. He has developed theme racedays, like the 'after-work race-day.' On the day I attend, employees go through the crowd, handing out German flags to be waved in unison to celebrate German Unity Day before the feature race.

Critically, he has raised purses, and embarked upon an international black type program. "The prize money has gone up by a factor of three,"

he said. "When I arrived, we had one Group 3, and no Listed races and we now have a Group 1, two Group 2s, two Group 3s, and seven Listed races. International racing is incredibly important to German owners and breeders. Our prize money is low, even in graded races. But the great thing is these races put a value on the horses, and in Germany, Black-Type horses, particularly middle-dis-

tance stayers, are very sought-after internationally. And so I think as a racetrack, to have a good Black-Type program is very beneficial to owners and breeders because it puts a value on the horse."

Hoppegarten has now been recognized as a national landmark, entitling it to government grants to continue the refurbishment of the historic buildings.





Watch Schöningh interact with racegoers throughout a day of racing, and there's a palpable sense of the appreciation they feel.

"On a typical raceday, between two and four people will walk up to me and say how thrilled they are that Hoppegarten is thriving and how they love the place," he said. "We certainly have a very loyal audience and they appreciate the place."

And he appreciates them, and it,

right back. "I love racing. I think it's a great sport. I love the horses. I love being outside. I love betting. I love how lots of parts of society mix and have a great time. At a place like Hoppegarten, you are really I suppose to a degree, a curator of an old institution, hoping to make it relevant to people of this age and to hand it on in the best shape possible."

Job well done.