

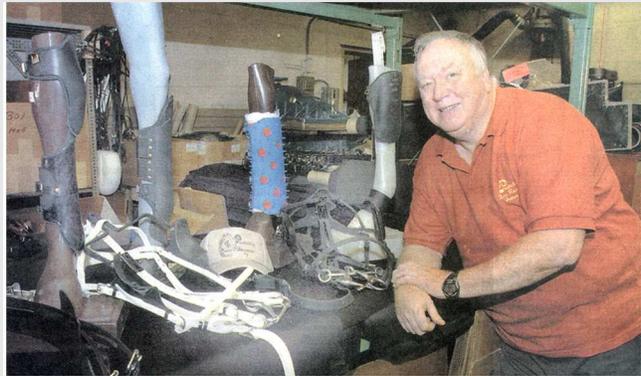
Glory days fading?

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Horse racing as a sport, way of life struggles to maintain its footing



Dick Hunt/Daily Tribune

Al Terwilliger of Clawson shows off the huge array of products he churns out every day in his Warren factory for the horse racing industry, including harnesses, knee pads, bridles and leg braces.

Editor's note: This is the second part of a six-part series on the Hazel Park Harness Raceway. Today: the business side of racing. Tomorrow: a look behind the scenes at the racetrack.

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The sport's survival matters to regular folks like Al and Myra Terwilliger of Clawson, owners of a unique local business that designs and manufactures horse equipment for trotters all over the world.

Al Terwilliger, 65, grew up steeped in racing in a family where a day at the track was a near-religious experience. His father, grandfather and older brother were all dedicated fans and horse owners who spent as much time as they could at the track.

A case in point: Father Pat Terwilliger died of a massive heart attack in a trotter cart in 1974, readying for yet another race.

"Racing is a family thing," Al Terwilliger said. "You own the horse, you ride it, you love it."

Al Terwilliger appreciated horse racing, but he saw horses chafing under stiff bridles and riders inches from death. A lifelong tinkerer, he knew he could make it better.

"As a kid, I saw people getting hurt and there were problems in the business with the equipment, so I just wanted to do what I could," he said.

He played around with harnesses, bridles and carts. When he was college age, he came up with changes that rocked the industry.

Terwilliger developed a new bridle with a soft, plastic crown that didn't hurt horses like stiff bridles. He developed a padded vest for riders to protect against falls, a harness that expands to "breathe" with the horse, knee pads to keep horses from damaging one leg with the other, and a panel to cover the center spokes of the carts.

Terwilliger rigged his inventions in his bedroom in the 1960s and expanded exponentially as demand grew. First, his workplace grew to the attic, then the garage, and finally to a small factory in Warren that now sends harness race equipment all over the world.

"I have more patents in harness than any other human being, probably 10 times more," Terwilliger said. "Anyone in harness racing will tell you Protecto is the best company in the world. We're one of the largest in the world."

Protecto Horse Equipment sends thousands of pieces to places as close as Hazel Park and as far away as Japan, Russia, Italy and France. The Terwilligers employ people with a wide range of specialties including Amish seamstresses, tool and die experts and plastic injection mold technicians.

They figure their own small industry, just a stone's throw across Dequindre from Hazel Park, includes hundreds of people who need horse racing.

"We have the dye, we take it to an injection molding place, we cut the

inside pieces, then we have the Amish sew it up north; then we bring it back to our own factory where we put all the straps on it," Myra Terwilliger, 65, explained. "People think about racing and they think about the track. But that's not it. It's all these other people who are affected by what happens to racing. It's a huge network."

The Warren factory has 8-10 full-time employees and roughly 50 subcontractors.

"We buy plastic from another company. We get big UPS shipments every day. We have truckers, exporters because we sell internationally, so many people are involved in what we do," Myra Terwilliger said.

The family is holding out for slot machines at the track because that is the only way they believe their factory, and all their friends who work in it, can continue to make a living, but the couple married 33 years say it's not all about money.

They also have a sentimental attachment to the old sport.

"It was beautiful in Hazel Park. There were people all over, everywhere. Now it's different," Myra Terwilliger said. "The horses aren't quite as good as they used to be. The crowds are smaller; people aren't as interested."

Ten to 15 years ago, 42,000 Michiganders derived all or part of their living from horse racing, according to state records. Now the number includes 24,000-26,000 people directly affected by the fate of Michigan racing — track employees, breeders, trainers, feed people, farmers growing hay and grain, blacksmiths, accountants and veterinarians.

"Horse racing is struggling in all states, but it's a very important part of Michigan's economy," Geake said.

Sara Linsmeier-Wurfel, spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Agriculture, said the sport brings \$1.2 billion a year to Michigan agriculture, a \$37 billion-a-year industry.

"Horse racing is definitely important to agriculture," Linsmeier-Wurfel said. "We have 125 different commodities in our agriculture, second only to California, and horse racing is one of them

