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# Pocono Downs' Banks inducted into Harness Racing Hall of Fame

BY STEVE BENNETT STAFF WRITER

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Former Pocono Downs owner Joseph Banks.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

To say Joseph Banks was ahead of his time is probably an understatement. A highly successful local business man, Banks purchased Pocono Downs out of bankruptcy in 1983 and essentially saved the sport of harness racing in the state and was instrumental in the expansion of the industry.



One day in the early 1990s, Banks, along with his daughter Jennifer, were at the track surveying the premises. Jennifer Banks recalled her father telling her someday the vacant land "over there" will be eventually where a casino will sit.

Banks died in 1996 and didn't see his prediction come true.

On Saturday night, Banks was one of five people honored by the Keystone Chapter of the United States Harness Writers Association with induction into the Pennsylvania Harness Racing Hall of Fame at the Omni in Bedford, Pa.

"I think it's a great honor for all his efforts," Jennifer Banks said. "The track was pretty popular and well attended in the 1960s and 1970s. Then it had a pretty big dip, like most harness tracks in the state, it was hurting. At the time, my dad worked really hard and became his own lobbyist. He spent a lot of time in Harrisburg. He more or less said the life expectancy for harness and thoroughbred tracks in the state is doomed if they don't do anything."

Following his purchase of the track, Banks immediately went to work to revive the facility. He replaced the track surface, installed new lighting and refurbished the upper grandstand. The clubhouse was another area of the facility Banks worked hard to upgrade.

His biggest accomplishment just might have been working with legislatures to expand off-site gambling where races from around the country could be simulcast at Pocono Downs.

"In the 1980s legislation was passed with interstate betting, then it became intrastate betting," Jennifer Banks said. "That really kept the industry going. It gave it a shot in the arm. He worked hard and closely with a lot of other people to get that accomplished. He really got involved in that."

Thanks to Banks' efforts, off-track betting became available in 1988, which helped boost the purses for winning drivers. Not long after, Pocono Downs had built five OTB parlors across the state.

Ron Battoni, who served as the executive director of the Pennsylvania Harness Horsemen's Association before "semi" retiring in 2015, worked closely with Banks in the early going. Banks was tough, but fair, he said. More importantly, Battoni said, he was meticulous.

"He took it out of bankruptcy and then took it over himself," Battoni said. "The first run-in I had with him, I got the job as executive secretary for the horsemen's association. The contract was up. Back then if there was no horsemen's agreement you can't simulcast. Things didn't go well when we first met. We settled the contract for simulcasting on New Year's Eve. After that we got along great. The best way to describe him is that he was a great man."

Banks came on the racing scene at the perfect time, Battoni said. Pennsylvania was about to pass off-track wagering. Pocono Downs had the ability to develop five off-track wagering sites. The first was built in Allentown. The next was built in Erie.

"After that along came full-card simulcasting," Battoni said. "Back then, it was always simulcasting tracks in Pennsylvania. When full-card simulcasting came in 1993, that meant OTB would never close. You could take any track in the country and simulcast that. It was a big push for (Banks) and us as far as purses."

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