

Comment by the Editor

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE KITE TRACK

A race track designed with one turn instead of two seemed to be a great improvement over the standard elliptical type. The straightaways were longer and the curve, plotted with a greater radius, was so gradual that the old top-heavy, high-wheeled sulkies would not skid. Besides reducing the probability of accidents in the struggle for the pole before reaching the turn, the kite track, with the small loop at the apex, facilitated scoring. But the greatest advantage was in the fact that harness horses were able to trot or pace a mile in two or three seconds faster time. It is significant that many records were reduced in 1891 and 1892, and that most of the new times were set on the kite tracks at Stockton, California, and Independence, Iowa.

Nevertheless there were serious disadvantages of the kite track. Considerably more land was required; the danger of accidents at the apex where the straightaways crossed was more imminent than at the turn; and some drivers believed that horses trained to finish down the home stretch with a burst of speed would find the kite

straightaway too long to maintain their best pace. Moreover, the spectators, who paid for the races, were dissatisfied. During three-fourths of a heat the horses were more than a quarter of a mile away from the grand stand at the apex, and the judges' stand at the inner angle of the crossing obstructed the view of the start from one side and the finish from the other.

Probably, however, none of these defects would have caused the decline of the kite track. The decisive factor was the invention of the bicycle sulky. In 1892 somebody devised a way of attaching strong bicycle wheels to an old sulky frame. Thus the weight of the rig was reduced, the distracting rattle of wooden spokes was eliminated, the ball-bearing wheels were easy-running, and the pneumatic tires prevented skidding on a turn. In September, 1891, Nancy Hanks set a world trotting record at 2:09 with a high-wheeled sulky, and a year later, hitched to a bike, she lowered her own time five full seconds on an elliptical track.

Within the four years from 1890 to 1893, racing records were broken again and again. Kite tracks and bicycle sulkies accounted for most of the new marks. And the light, silent, non-skidding sulky nullified the principal advantage of the kite track.

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