



Ohio Harness Horsemen's Association

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Ohio Harness Racing Continues to be a Good Investment

Whether harness racing is a good investment has been looked at off and on since the implementation of subsidies from video lottery terminals at commercial racetracks. Harness racing receives money to bolster purses and make the sport competitive in the marketplace. Often articles are published, and opinions given, that point to declining handle numbers at racetracks. Is looking at handle the best or only way to decide the success of or direction of the sport of harness racing? Although it is the easiest barometer to gauge the success of harness racing, it is probably the most ineffective.

It is an even more ineffective measure since the actual numbers are hard to find because agencies report handle numbers differently. They do this because not all monies wagered fall under their jurisdiction. Take the Ohio State Racing Commission (OSRC) for example, that publishes annual handle numbers for the four extended meet harness tracks and three thoroughbred tracks under their jurisdiction. However, the OSRC does not publish the total handle, or "all sources handle." Total handle is combined money wagered on a race at the facility hosting the race, plus money wagered on the same race from other tracks, online wagers, mobile wagers, etc. The OSRC only publishes and tracks the money wagered live at the track hosting the race. The United Stated Trotting Association (USTA) also reports handle. Although the USTA's numbers account for more than those published by the OSRC, the USTA only tracks money wagered within the continental boundaries of North America. When analyzing the total handle for a track such as MGM Northfield Park with a large following beyond North America, especially in Australia, the USTA tracked handle numbers do not provide total handle information either.

Since handle is reported so differently it is easy to misreport and misrepresent where harness racing stands. It is also one of the main reasons baseline handle comparisons alone are a poor measure of gauging the sport's success. Due to the difficulty with reporting among the various sources, where are total handle figures? The answer is from the tracks themselves, tote companies, or settlement agents. The following chart illustrates the vast differences when looking at the 2022 handle for MGM Northfield Park:

	NFLD Reported Total Handle	Reported by USTA	Reported by OSRC
NFLD 2022	\$264,562,332	\$239,187,268	\$33,138,728

Notwithstanding that a case has been made not to use handle alone as a measure to determine success, even if one cannot get past handle dollars, the harness racing industry in Ohio shows numbers that are encouraging and proves that the sport of harness racing is a good investment. Examining the state's four racetracks, we will start with the largest handle: MGM Northfield Park near Cleveland, Ohio had a total handle of \$195,706,741 in 2013. MGM Northfield has an increase in handle in seven of the last 10 years (even counting a large drop when dark due to Covid). These increases in dollars bet have bolstered the track over 35% from 2013 to 2023 to \$264,577,790.

Although Northfield Park has the strongest overall handle, its 35% increase is the smallest increase throughout the Buckeye State. Northfield is always among the top-wagered harness tracks in North America; however, the larger a track's handle, the less likely there will be large percentage increases.

Hollywood Dayton Raceway began racing in 2014 and has shown a year-over-year increase in handle in eight of the nine years it has been in operation. Their inaugural figure was \$7,218,434 and has grown by 368% to \$33,816,476 in 2023.

	DTN Reported Total Handle	Reported by USTA	Reported by OSRC
DTN 2022	\$30,882,771	\$30,882,771	\$6,615,773

Miami Valley, near Lebanon, Ohio also opened in 2014 with an initial \$9,040,017 wagered and, like Dayton Raceway, has seen an increase in eight of its nine years in operation (Covid being the only exception) with a 524% jump to \$47,362,657 in 2023.

	MVG Reported Total Handle	Reported by USTA	Reported by OSRC
MVG 2022	\$43,944,860	\$43,944,860	\$12,738,895

Scioto Downs in Columbus, Ohio has also realized a robust growth in handle throughout the past decade. In 2013, Scioto's races realized wagers of \$12,846,407. That number has increased 327% to \$54,837,490 in 2023.

	SCD Reported Total Handle	Reported by USTA	Reported by OSRC
SCD 2022	\$41,499,206	\$41,499,206	\$16,180,040

Often the harness industry points at handle to prove a positive return on investment. The more important fact to point out is that harness racing is more than handle numbers. It is an industry of people who work hard every day to protect and care for the animals, ardently and actively advertise, and promote an industry that they love. Ohio's harness racing scene supports over 20,000 in the Buckeye State and is an important spoke in the agriculture wheel that helps drive Ohio's economy.

Ohio's harness horses eat nearly 100,000,000 pounds of grain and 4,500,000 bales of hay and use over 3,000,000 bales of straw each year, and this is purchased from Ohio farmers. It is impossible to look past the fact that Ohio's harness racing industry is a big money maker for the state and its \$2.8 billion annual economic contribution important to all Ohioans.

Not only does Ohio show a return on investment in harness racing, so do the permit holders. Scioto Downs opened its 2023 live racing season with a new \$30,000,000 grandstand and anticipates opening next year with a new \$16,000,000 paddock. MGM has invested over \$10,000,000 in Northfield Park in the last five years for projects such as building upgrades, new LED lighting, new tote room and odds board, simulcasting upgraded to HD and resurfacing of the racetrack.

A strong harness racing scene helps to add to Ohio's strong overall economy and continues to make the harness racing industry in the Buckeye State a smart investment for Ohio's legislature. Ohio's positive trajectory and support from the Statehouse in Columbus are a large reason horse investors across the nation continue to buy, race and breed in Ohio.

The next time the narrative that harness racing is not a good investment is made take the time to educate and help others see and understand the entire business of harness racing and its impact within a state. We here in Ohio know that impact and, Ohio is "The Heart of it All."