

The Fair Grounds Through the Lens

*Photographs and Memories
of Horse Racing in New Orleans*

Peggy Scott Laborde • Principal photography by Louis Hodges, Jr.

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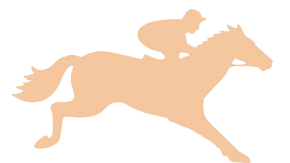
“The Fair Grounds was racing horses before Churchill Downs was built, before the first Kentucky Derby was run. So we’re talking about a lot of history here.”

—Angus Lind, retired *Times-Picayune* columnist and former Thoroughbred co-owner

For over a century and a half, the New Orleans Fair Grounds has thrilled spectators with the thunder and heart-pounding excitement of Thoroughbred horseracing. The 145-acre site has faced and overcome hurricanes, devastating fires, and financial turmoil. Season after season, the historic track draws loyal crowds of patrons and world-class jockeys and horses.

Researched in conjunction with a documentary on the subject, this stand-alone volume includes archival photographs, contemporary images, and interviews with those who have helped shape the Fair Grounds into the vibrant venue it is today. It offers an insider’s view of the often-tumultuous journey of one of America’s oldest and most esteemed racetracks. Author Peggy Scott Laborde and official Fair Grounds photographer Louis Hodges, Jr., invite you to experience a world of thrills, triumph, and—above all—wonder!

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Panoramic view of the Fair Grounds infield. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



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French-born jockey Florent Geroux rides Louisiana-bred Lady Grantham to victory. Geroux was the leading jockey at the Fair Grounds during the 2015-16 season. The thoroughbred is named after a character on the popular Downton Abbey public-television drama series. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Acknowledgments



Thanks to everyone who was kind enough to share their memories and observations of the track in the documentary *New Orleans Fair Grounds Memories*. Readers will meet some of them in this book.

Also, as always, my thanks to my husband, Errol, whose support makes what I do possible.

Special thanks to Allan Pizzato, WYES president/general manager; Beth Arroyo Utterback, the station's executive vice-president/chief operating officer; and the Joe W. and Dorothy Dorsett Brown Foundation for their support of the program.

Kudos to Ashli Richard Morris, Kelsi Schreiber, Steve Patriquin, and Burke Bischoff, whose transcription efforts greatly facilitated this work. And thanks to my friends Dominic Massa, Larry Roussarie, and Lenny Delbert for their multifaceted talent and efforts, as well as Abram Himmelstein for his input. I am grateful to Bryan and Vickie Krantz, who opened their Fair Grounds historical archive to us, and to longtime friend and New Orleans historian John Magill, who shared his indexing skills for this project.

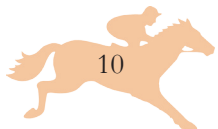
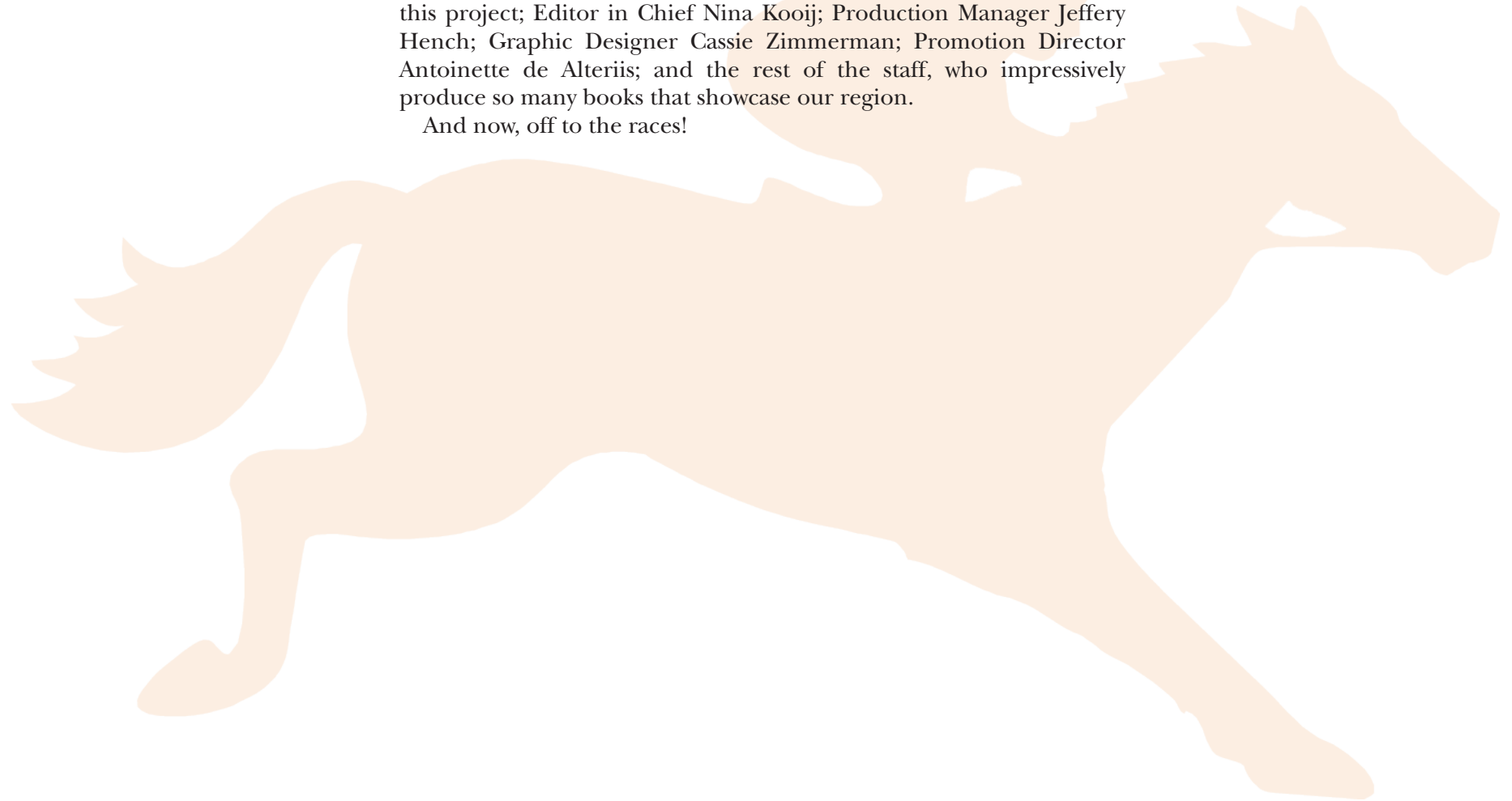
Gratitude goes to Tim Bryant, president of the Fair Grounds; Mark Conner, Sr., director of marketing; Sandra Salmen, retired Fair Grounds Horsemen's Relations director; and Brian Spencer, manager of communications. And, of course, to Churchill Downs, parent company of the Fair Grounds, whose willingness to provide information and access was invaluable. Also thanks to photographer Alexander Barkoff for capturing some very special Fair Grounds moments.

A book called *The Fair Grounds Big Shots & Long Shots*, published

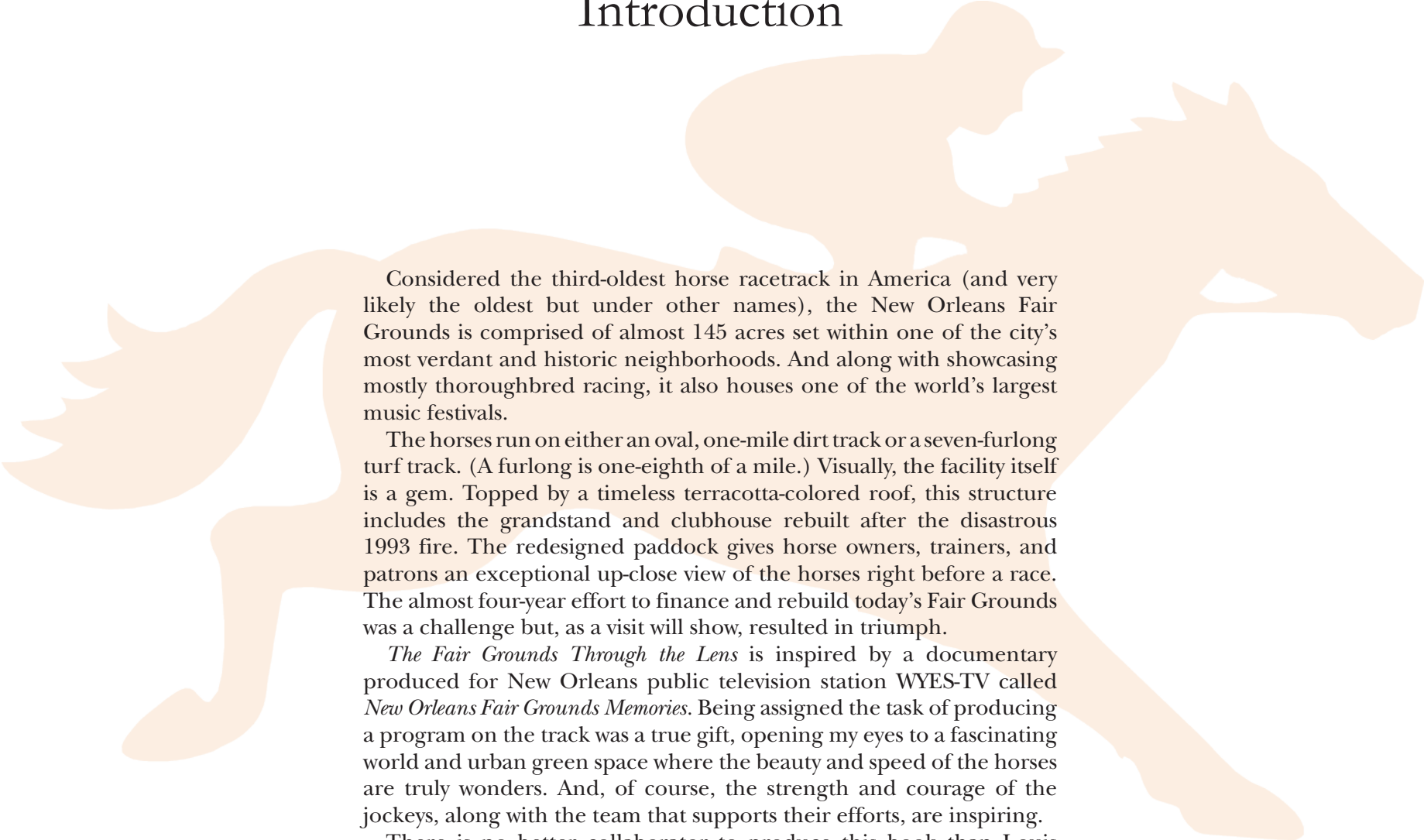
by Arthur Hardy Enterprises in 1998, proved very helpful during my research. Written by longtime sportswriter Bob Roesler, it is chockfull of stories about some of the track personalities from the more distant past.

This book wouldn't exist without Pelican Publishing Company. Thanks to Publisher Kathleen Calhoun Nettleton, who asked me to do this project; Editor in Chief Nina Kooij; Production Manager Jeffery Hench; Graphic Designer Cassie Zimmerman; Promotion Director Antoinette de Alteriis; and the rest of the staff, who impressively produce so many books that showcase our region.

And now, off to the races!



Introduction



Considered the third-oldest horse racetrack in America (and very likely the oldest but under other names), the New Orleans Fair Grounds is comprised of almost 145 acres set within one of the city's most verdant and historic neighborhoods. And along with showcasing mostly thoroughbred racing, it also houses one of the world's largest music festivals.

The horses run on either an oval, one-mile dirt track or a seven-furlong turf track. (A furlong is one-eighth of a mile.) Visually, the facility itself is a gem. Topped by a timeless terracotta-colored roof, this structure includes the grandstand and clubhouse rebuilt after the disastrous 1993 fire. The redesigned paddock gives horse owners, trainers, and patrons an exceptional up-close view of the horses right before a race. The almost four-year effort to finance and rebuild today's Fair Grounds was a challenge but, as a visit will show, resulted in triumph.

The Fair Grounds Through the Lens is inspired by a documentary produced for New Orleans public television station WYES-TV called *New Orleans Fair Grounds Memories*. Being assigned the task of producing a program on the track was a true gift, opening my eyes to a fascinating world and urban green space where the beauty and speed of the horses are truly wonders. And, of course, the strength and courage of the jockeys, along with the team that supports their efforts, are inspiring.

There is no better collaborator to produce this book than Louis Hodges, Jr., whose family has been photographing the track for more than half a century. You will get to read his recollections of a place where he has spent much of his life.

Peggy Scott Laborde



Author Peggy Scott Laborde. (Photograph by Larry Roussarie)

The current structure that houses the Fair Grounds Race Course and Slots was completed in 1997. It was designed by Eskew Filson Architects and Froelich Kow and Gong Architects. (Photograph by Michelle Lovell)



I shot my first picture at the Fair Grounds when I was about twelve years old. It was a photo showing the grandstand on a busy day with the horses running into the first turn. I was hooked.

My father, Louis Hodges, Sr., began working at the Fair Grounds in 1948 with then track photographer Jack Blythe. But my family's ties with this track actually go back to the 1930s, when my very Irish grandfather decided that one of his three sons should be a jockey. My uncle Sammy took up the challenge and had a successful riding career until World War II called.

Over the years I worked other jobs, but the racetrack always beckoned. After completing college in 1970, followed by a stint in the army and work as a journalist with the *Daily Herald* in Gulfport and the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, I joined my father in 1976 on the racetrack. Together we worked both Arlington Park and the Fair Grounds, until he retired from the track in 1978 to concentrate on our photo lab.

My brother, Kevin Hodges, mother, Dolly, and wife, Leslie, also worked with my father at the track.

I've used numerous cameras over the years. In the days of medium-format film cameras, I used Hasselblad, Pentax 6x7, Mamiya RB67, and Fuji. Today we use Canon digital cameras exclusively.

Not a day goes by that at least one person at the track doesn't ask me about my father or some other family member. My daughter, Amanda, has now followed me into the business to carry on the family tradition of Hodges Photography at the New Orleans Fair Grounds.

Louis Hodges, Jr.





*Fair Grounds photographer Louis Hodges, Jr.
(Photograph by Amanda Hodges Weir)*



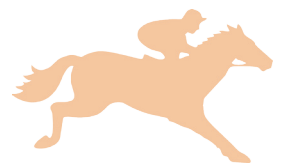
A golden foggy morning at the track. (Photograph by Alexander Barkoff)





Today's Fair Grounds Race Course and Slots entrance on Gentilly Boulevard. (Photograph by Peggy Scott Laborde)

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Dressed in Thanksgiving-themed costumes, these patrons are part of a growing trend of racetrack fans who costume for the ceremonial opening of the Fair Grounds on Thanksgiving. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Chapter 1

The Season Begins: Thanksgiving and Other Holidays

Thanksgiving week at the Fair Grounds is the traditional start to the New Orleans horseracing season. And even though the focus is on the jockeys and their horses, some track patrons stand out in colorful hats and costumes. Following are comments on this beloved local tradition by some who have participated in it for many years.

Sandra Salmen (Retired Fair Grounds Horsemen's Relations Director /Former Thoroughbred Owner): Thanksgiving Day and Derby Day are the two days that we always encourage our lady patrons, and men patrons too, to dress up. The Bywater neighborhood group and the Marigny group really started coming in after Hurricane Katrina and I think they have added a flavor to the Fair Grounds second to none.

Angus Lind (Retired *Times-Picayune* Columnist/Former Thoroughbred Co-owner): We used to dress up and spend the day out there in the old clubhouse. I can remember one year seeing Jimmy Durante out there, and it just attracted a lot of people—musicians, Louis Prima. It was very festive, and it was kind of the place to be.

James Gill, who's British and a longtime Fair Grounds fan, gives his unique perspective.

James Gill (*New Orleans Advocate* Columnist/Former Thoroughbred Co-owner): It strikes me as an excellent way to celebrate an American



This couple goes for a retro look at the track on Thanksgiving. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)

holiday. When the season begins, everyone's in a good mood. They still have hopes of winning money and other wild dreams like that.

Bonnie Baird Boyd (Former Debutante/Meeting Planner): My earliest memory is Thanksgiving morning. My grandfather and father owned Armored Car Incorporated and they took care of all of the money that needed to be delivered from the bank. They would take it out on Thanksgiving morning and it would be distributed to all the ladies who would be counting it out in the bowels of the racetrack. Some of them had gloves on to keep their fingers from getting green.

Ronnie Lamarque (Thoroughbred Owner/Co-owner, Risen Star): There's nothing better than to be able to be there for Thanksgiving. And I know you have the turkey, but, boy, I love the corned beef and cabbage. Just old friends.

Bryan Krantz (Fair Grounds Owner, 1990-2004): Corned beef is actually a very interesting tradition at the Fair Grounds. You don't see a lot of corned beef in New Orleans. But the caterer was a company called Turf Catering that started the steamship round roast beef and the corned beef on the concession stands. When we took over in 1990, we actually auditioned purveyors for that first year to find out who we thought was best suited.

Tom Amoss (Thoroughbred Trainer): My fondest memories growing up were when we would have Thanksgiving dinner or lunch at the racetrack, and spending time and betting a couple of dollars on this horse or that horse. It's a common denominator between the fans and the people that work out there that Thanksgiving at the racetrack is a tradition. And it holds true today. I still see it all the time, people bringing their children to the racetrack for that specific day and enjoying a day of racing.

It's definitely festive; a lot of people get dressed up. There's a younger generation, group of fans, in their twenties and thirties that actually dress up retro and come to the track very elegantly dressed. And it's becoming a bigger and bigger group out there. They're very noticeable. They look great, and they really enjoy the pageantry of the



Hopefully this lady will hold some lucky bets as well as cards. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Corned beef and cabbage is considered the Fair Grounds' signature dish. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)

sport. And that's really what it's all about. It's watching these beautiful animals run and competing against each other. Yes, it's festive, but it's also quite electric, particularly when the horses are running. Watching a race, a single race, is what can hook a fan, because it's just a great competition with these majestic animals.

Evelyn Benoit (Thoroughbred Owner/Brittlyn Stable): With Thanksgiving, you haven't seen everybody in so many months, and all your friends are calling you because it's something special. It's historical. And it's just a gathering of everyone. And to have a horse in on Thanksgiving Day is what every owner dreams about. In 2013 I won the Thanksgiving Handicap with Gantry. I won three races that day!

Chris Champagne (Comedian/Fair Grounds Pari-Mutuel Clerk): It's interesting—from sitting behind the window, you get to watch this tableau, and it's every strata of society: it's old, young, in between. Some of the patrons wear the hats in a spoofy way, some of them in a fashionable way. And there are a lot of artistic people in New Orleans, so it lends itself to this all through the spectrum from lowest classes to the highest classes. Thanksgiving is already a holiday, but we compound it by making it also the opening day of the track, which is also a holiday in New Orleans. And that's kind of the way New Orleans is a festive place.

Francis “June” Melancon, Jr. (1946-2015, Thoroughbred Trainer): Everybody starts getting their horses ready. Everybody starts getting anxious for the races. A couple of days before, they already know who is going to run and who isn't going to run. So you get a little jittery, you know, get a little nervous and just can't wait for that day to get there.

Martin Brown (Former Jockey): As a rider, you want to win a race opening day or two or three races opening week. Whoever wins the most races that week, this is who's going to get a lot of attention.

Around Christmas, traditional decorations can be spotted at the track, especially in the paddock area. Wooden cutout trees are “adorned” with horseshoes. And during the Carnival season, bunting of purple, gold, and green (the traditional colors of Mardi Gras) festoons the mezzanines.



An audience of all ages at the finish line. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



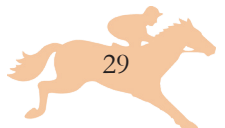
The tradition of wearing hats on Thanksgiving is experiencing a resurgence.
(Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Dapper best describes this twosome. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Waiting at the rail for the next race. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)





A jockey rides his mount through the breezeway that connects the paddock to the racecourse. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



A family enjoys the racing action. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



This couple is anticipating the next big day to celebrate. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



Face painting is one of the numerous activities during the track's Holiday Family Day. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



While patrons ponder the next race, they have a magnificent view of the New Orleans skyline. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



French-born jockey Florent Geroux sports a “Happy New Year” top hat. He was named a Jockey of the Week by the Jockeys’ Guild, an organization that represents almost a thousand jockeys in North America. He won the Louisiana Derby and the Risen Star Stakes in 2016. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)



The balcony bunting of purple, gold, and green overlooking the paddock shows that it's Mardi Gras season in New Orleans. (Photograph by Louis Hodges, Jr.)