

**Excerpted with permission, from Field of Dreams (by Jessica Patterson) in the September/October issue of [Western Horse Review](#). Find the full feature in the issue now on newsstands, and find out what really happened to the Balzac race track and what the future may entail for it.**

Balzac. In Canada's horse racing world, the name conjures up not the quaint little village on the edge of metropolis Calgary, but rather, images of the track that never happened – despite dedicated efforts by players in the industry and a great deal of money. The grandiose plan encountered court-ordered creditor protection, death, the financial crisis, recession and water woes. The Balzac track was intended to breathe new life into an ailing Alberta horse racing industry. Now six barns sit empty and what was meant to be a world-class racing complex is a fallow field.

The Balzac racetrack was the brainchild and dream of the late Calgarian Dwight McLellan, a former businessman and real estate developer. McLellan's first passion was real estate, but horses came a close second, says Mat Monaco, executive director of the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association (HBPA) of Alberta.

"He was a great guy; young and enthusiastic. Dwight was a mover and a shaker in the real estate world. He was a smart businessman."

In 2002, McLellan founded the United Horseman of Alberta (UHA), a group of influential Albertans with a passion for racing. At that time, he and Ernie Caron, former CEO of the Calgary Airport Authority and then president of the Alberta Standardbred Association (ASHA), joined forces to secure a racing license. Caron's Calgary Entertainment and Racing Group (CREG) would deliver the bid and McLellan's team would work on the real estate. Their initial bid failed and the following year, the two separated and the plans for the racing entertainment centre with a mile-long track and 500 slot machines were cut back.

In 2004, the UHA was granted a long-term racetrack license valid until 2016 for their Balzac complex, set to open in the spring of 2007. The price tag for the luxurious facility was originally budgeted at \$80 million, to be shared among UHA board members, with Calvent LLC, owners of Emerald Downs near Seattle to contribute \$10 million, and Gateway Casinos Inc. to pitch in \$15 million, and the final \$30 million was to be borrowed.

The original plans for the racetrack and racing entertainment centre (REC) included a one-mile Thoroughbred track, a seven-furlong Standardbred track, a 440-yard “chute” for Quarter Horse racing, 10 barns with over 1,200 stalls, tack, feed and storage rooms. It would also include 60 external hot walkers, one covered Equi-Ciser, an administration building with a cafeteria, recreation rooms, a lounge, an office facility and parking on site. There were also plans for a 120-person dormitory for backstretch personnel and a satellite campus of Olds College.

By 2007, estimated costs for the track had ballooned to over \$140 million for the development alone, and an estimated \$238 - \$260 million to have it running. Then the bottom fell out. The financial crisis hit. The following year was a bleak year for the United Horsemen of Alberta. Both founder Dwight McLellan, and shareholder Robert Murphy, passed away.

Monaco believes McLellan, who was the president and face of UHA in its infancy, would have seen the project through to completion.

“I think if Dwight hadn’t passed away, this track would have been built by now,” Monaco says. “He was passionate, and he had the connections.”

Between the issues surrounding the water, the economic crash, and the loss of McLellan and Murphy, it took the UHA back to square one.

*As this issue went to press, players in the industry sat down once again with UHA president, Darcy Marler to discuss options for the track. This project lives or dies on the approval of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commissions decision, **December 31, 2012**. Until then, a formal agreement won't be signed.*