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Stones top Churchill's renter list

Renovation draws weddings, events

By **Gregory A. Hall**
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The Courier-Journal

Churchill Downs has been the home to more than horse racing during its 132 years. It's been the site of the Kentucky State Fair, a religious procession and orchestra performances.

Tonight's Rolling Stones concert adds a major rock-music event to the list.

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The Stones' show is the highest-profile event in the track's efforts to get more use out of -- and money from -- its facilities outside the spring and fall racing meets. Attracting more off-season events was one of the reasons for Churchill's \$121 million renovation that was completed last year.

So besides the races, that means more weddings, receptions and conference events --



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A worker was silhouetted on the main stage as workers prepared for the Rolling Stones concert at Churchill Downs.

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including an employee's nuptials the day after the Stones strut their stuff.

"We couldn't commit to Mick Jagger" being at the reception, track President Steve Sexton joked, "but we could commit to the facility."

Yesterday's concert preparations included covering part of the historic sandy loam track -- on which the Kentucky Derby is run -- for one of the Stones' mixing boards.

Earlier this month, Karen and David Jackie held their 100-person wedding reception at Churchill in a room near the finish line and the Twin Spires. Karen Jackie said she initially feared the stage might be under construction on her night, but also thought, "Can you think about the reception if I had the Stones as my band?"

Before looking for a location in January, Jackie said she had no idea the track played host to wedding receptions.

Churchill is still trying to educate potential customers about its accommodations, said Catherine Delaney, group marketing and sales director. The track couldn't effectively promote the facility until the renovation was finished in spring 2005.

Along with the new space, options for events include almost everything -- from the parking lots and the ground-floor brick space to rooms and terraces overlooking the track and the Twin Spires.

The average rental for space alone, Delaney said, is between \$2,500 and \$3,000. Food and beverage service is through the track's caterer, Levy Restaurants.

The Jackies' reception was in the fourth-floor Stakes Room, which the bride said impressed guests from St. Louis, where she's from, and the Louisvillians who normally don't get up close with the Spires.

The newlyweds had pictures taken all over the track. "It was just completely memorable," she said, especially for a couple of guests who wandered off to the simulcast betting area and won between \$400 and \$500.

Delaney said the track will play host to about 300 events this year outside the race meets, compared with fewer than 10 in some years before the renovation. The group sales staff has quadrupled to 15 during the race meets from three years ago, she said.

The added emphasis on rentals is in its "infancy," Sexton said, and still represents a small portion of the track's revenues.

"Racing is our core operation," he said.

Currently, Delaney said the track's off-season rentals are divided almost equally

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► **FULL COVERAGE:** [The Rolling Stones in concert](#)



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The media interviewed Rolling Stones spokesman Tim McWilliams as crews built the stage for tonight's concert. (Photos by Arza Barnett, The Courier-Journal)



between corporate and social events.

The availability of added space at Churchill "now makes our job just a little bit easier," said Jim Wood, president of the Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Organizers of the 2008 Ryder Cup, to be played at Valhalla Golf Club, are planning to use the racetrack, Wood said. It will be a hospitality event, Delaney said.

Clients can be entertained "in the spirit of Derby" if not on the day itself, Delaney said. The group sales crew works to line up trainers, jockeys and the Churchill bugler, if that's what clients want.

"We really are able to bring in the feeling ... not only with the historic setting around you, but bringing that race-day feeling," Delaney said.

The Jackies used the bugler.

"Our entrance was the 'Call to the Post,' " she said.

Delaney said the track has had to turn down some requests, including a number of people who wanted to use the racing surface itself.

Some areas, such as the Derby Winner's Circle, also cost more and are rented out judiciously. That's because "it is sacred space," she said.

Track officials said they also will look hard before allowing more large-scale concerts like the Stones'.

"It'd have to be the right opportunity," Sexton said. "... I don't think we'll be a major player in the concert field."

The track is limited by its racing meets and daily horse training most of the year. Also, its 51,000 permanent seats are spread out over more than a quarter mile.

Still, the track also is a "unique venue," he said.

More likely for Churchill Downs would be infield concerts and festivals.

"The infrastructure's already there," Sexton said.

But in the case of a band as big as the Stones, they got the grandstand.

"The Stones can get what they want," Churchill-based trainer Frank Brothers said, echoing one of the band's hits. "They're in kind of a league by themselves."

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.



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Workers laid metal beams for one of the two mixing-board platforms to be used for the Stones concert. (By Arza Barnett, The Courier-Journal)

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