

## The Starting Gate

*By Andrea Edmundson*

1. I'm focused on the muzzles of the eight horses just six feet in front of us. Their nostrils are flared, emitting foamy saliva that immediately freezes in the 10-degree Chicago air. Their athletic breathing almost hides the rhythmic left-right left-right sounds of their hooves pounding on the frozen gravel of Balmoral Park Racetrack, one of several harness horse racetracks in the Midwest. Each horse presents a unique portrait: Sweating hides of bay, chestnut, even a rare gray; leather bridles wrapped in sheepskins of reds, blues, greens; and each horse sporting a different colored race number above its forelock, waving in the wind with the same left-right left-right pattern of its pace.
2. Behind them, the sulky drivers' heads tilt to the sides as they try to see past the tails flying two feet in front of them. They occasionally shout their status to each other, "coming up on the left," focused on staying as close as possible to their posted gate position. The sulky wheels are a foot apart, teasing a disaster if they lock together, but the helmeted drivers wearing the colors of their stables look confident, leaning backwards on the taut reins, feet in stirrups as the eager horses pull ahead.
3. Just 10 minutes earlier, my husband and I had climbed into the back of the 1972 Cadillac Seville starting gate. It was parked on the gravel track near the paddock, about ¼ mile before the starting line, on the inside rail. Around us, drivers in their sulkies were warming up their horses. Unlike in thoroughbred horse racing where the horses bolt from a fixed starting gate, standardbred races start at a gate in motion. Thoroughbreds have jockeys; standardbreds have drivers.
4. I've never been comfortable riding in the backseat of a vehicle but it's even more disconcerting when your seat faces backwards. We climbed into the modified backseat, adjusting our bunched down jackets to the snug fit. To our left was a driver who was also facing backwards but seated 18 inches higher than us, his head in an elevated glass bubble mounted on the Cadillac's roof. At his waist was a control platform with a microphone, a joystick, and a small hand crank. The back seat had another unique feature: An open window that framed an icy winter landscape – flat snowy fields topped with blue sky and sunshine so brittle it could splinter. The Cadillac's heater blew full force to compensate for the cold, but we could still see our breaths.
5. From the outside, a starting gate looks like a car with ladder-like wings attached to each side. However, when the gate is in use, the wings extend hydraulically, making it look like a T-shaped bug flying backwards. Each side has four marked spaces, totaling eight post positions for the horses.
6. Our friend Korinne, a licensed harness racing driver, had secured this unique ride for us. She sat in the traditional passenger seat next to a second, forward-facing driver. Turning, she explained that the front driver only controls the steering, keeping the gate in the correct position on the racetrack. The

back driver, however, controls the speed of the gate with a joystick throttle and the opening and the closing of the starting gate wings with a special lever.

7. A bugle sounded the “Call to Post,” announcing the beginning of the race. The Cadillac accelerates slowly while the drivers started to pull in behind it. The back driver calls to the drivers through his microphone: “Ready to come on up.” “Get in order.” “Number 3, pick up speed.” Soon, a cacophony of eight drivers, 16 sulky wheels and 32 horse legs are side-by-side, skillfully in their own lanes at the gate.
8. “Picking up speed” the back driver warns everyone. Then, as we hit 30 mph at the starting line, he shouts, “We’re off.” He pulls ahead of the field, retracting the wings and swinging the Cadillac to the outside rail, parallel but slightly ahead of the bunch. His job now is to monitor the race. We, however, are immersed in the race just 10 feet away: Hard hooves pounding, horses snorting, drivers shouting as each one shuffles for position in the one-mile race. In less than two minutes, we approach the finish line, whips cracking - not on the horses but on the side of the sulky or as a tap on the harness, a signal for the horse to give its best effort. Number 5, Spooky Duke, surges ahead, the winner. The next four cross the finish line, ensuring their share of the purse money. Only now do they all slow down and, with the Cadillac, return to the paddock. We thank Korinne and both gate drivers for one of the most exhilarating rides of our lives.

