

Track poised for transformation

■ The next seven months will see opening of new venues and track

RICHARD TROUT
NEWS-SUN
With a permanent restaurant, buffet and entertainment/sports bar opening in early May, Black Gold Casino will be going through its first major transformation since opening in October. Thoroughbred horse racing beginning Sept. 23 and running through Dec. 4 at Zia Park Race Track will be the next major transformation. The \$45 million track and casino are expected to create about 450 jobs during the racing season. The casino employs about 176 people during the off-season.

"The next seven months are going to be very exciting," said casino marketing director Phil Ziegler. "We've got two more phases opening in the next seven months, so it's going to be really exciting."

Meanwhile, the casino itself has been noticing good crowds despite losing a little of its initial luster. Zia Park's owners have stated they expect to see 1.2 million visitors a year coming to Hobbs as a result of the track and casino.

"Not much has changed," Ziegler said regarding casino patrons. "I think everything is doing really good. We're really busy on the weekend and during the week. It's been pretty steady."

While the 600-slot casino has not rotated in any new slot machines yet, Ziegler said it may do so in the near future.

"Obviously every casino does that," he said. "You just look at new games after a few months."

With a dance floor set up in its temporary simulcast and buffet tent, Black Gold has been hosting a band called Aces High on the weekend. Ziegler is not sure whether the casino will expand the



The main floor of the Zia Park Race Track and Black Gold Casino will offer a restaurant, buffet and a sports bar expected to open in early May.

KIMBERLY RYAN/NEWS-SUN



ZIA PARK
a BLACK GOLD CASINO

Total construction cost:
\$45 million

Total employees:
450 racing season, 176 off-season

Total number of slot machines:
600

Horse racing schedule:
Sept. 30-Dec. 4

Restaurant, buffet, sports bar opening:
Early May

entertainment to week days upon opening the permanent entertainment area in May.

"But definitely we'll have live weekend entertainment," he said. "We're going to have different bands and a variety of music."

The entertainment area will also feature a window overlooking the paddock, which is used for showing horses in between races.

Regarding which slot machines have been most popular in recent weeks, Ziegler said there's an easy answer to that question — Wheel of Fortune.

"Everybody loves Wheel of Fortune," he said.

"They literally run to get to those machines when the casino opens."

Lucky Carlsbad

Looking at the big payouts, it appears Carlsbad has lady luck on its side.

Thus far the casino's big winners have included two \$20,000 winners from Carlsbad, a \$10,000 winner from Lubbock, an \$8,000 winner from Hobbs and a \$5,000 winner from Carlsbad.

On an unseasonably warm, sunny day Feb. 15, the casino was buzzing with activity and the Wheel of Fortune games did not have a single vacancy.

"The location," Terry Forrest of Midland said about the casino's best feature.

Although this was Forrest's first time visiting the complex, he said he would certainly come back soon.

"It's a very nice facility with a friendly atmosphere," he said.

Denise Weber of Odessa also noted this was

her first casino visit.

"It's more homey," she said regarding how the facility compares to others. "It's not big or loud and it doesn't have the smell of alcohol everywhere. ... And I like the fact that when I first played a \$5 slot I got \$300 back. I was really happy about that."

Vonnie Becton of Idalou, Texas, drove two hours to test her luck for the third time in Hobbs. Becton, who said she'd definitely make return visits, usually plays the coveted Wheel of Fortune game.

The Tuesday crowd was not without a few locals.

Just as she prepared to push a button for another spin, Francis Hernandez of Hobbs said she visits the casino about twice a week.

"I don't really win that much. I just enjoy coming," Hernandez said, adding her top prize in Hobbs was around \$160.

But Mickey Pittman of Carlsbad said he won

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Knights of Columbus

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