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ISSUE #219 - JANUARY 16, 2026



Trainer Devon Gittens with his first "big horse" Purrsistent, owned and bred by Dr. Betty Hughes. (Mikaela MacKenzie)

Gittens Takes His Talent to the Big Apple

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[Full story here.](#)



Opportunities for Aspiring Racehorse Grooms!

For anyone who has ever dreamed of working with racehorses, the HBPA of Manitoba Inc. is again offering a unique chance to gain hands-on experience through a 4-week paid training program!

Further details are available at hbpamanitoba.ca, and applications are NOW BEING ACCEPTED! Interested applicants should submit their materials to hbpamanitoba@mymts.net.

Amber Fehr was a successful participant in the 2025 Racehorse Groom Training Program!

[Learn more.](#)



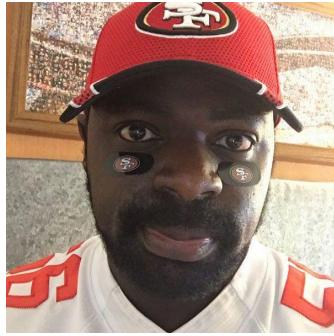
The fun never stops at Assiniboia Downs Winnipeg's place to play and win!

Did you know that Assiniboia Downs is Winnipeg's #1 Spot for VLT Jackpots? Play any of our 140 VLTs in the Club West Gaming Lounge for your chance to win!

- 🎰 Free Spin to Win draws — Friday, Saturday and Sunday starting at 6 p.m.
- 💵 Free \$200 cash draws — Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 9 p.m.

Click [here](#) to see our recent jackpots.

Open daily from 10 a.m. to 1 a.m.



Travers Cummings

NFL Picks by TravyFootball Divisional Round

Last week was a 1–2 grind, but that's playoff football. This weekend has everything—the league's most unstoppable quarterback trying to carry a banged-up roster into a hornet's nest, a team everyone left for dead suddenly feeling like it's playing with house money, and yes... the Bears doing Bears things again and somehow refusing to go away. Injuries, revenge spots, trick plays, and momentum swings are all in play, and I've got strong feelings about where this is headed. Divisional round football is where the edges matter most—see my picks [here](#).



Road to the Kentucky Derby

- Jan. 16, 17, 18 - Kentucky Derby Future Wager
- Jan. 17 - Lecomte (FG) - 20 points
- Jan. 31 - Withers (Aqu) - 20 points
- Jan. 31 - Holy Bull (GP) - 20 points
- Jan. 31 - Southwest (OP) - 20 points



Looking for a Special Photo?
Track Photographer Jason Halstead may have just what you're looking for

Looking for that extra-special photo of your big horse, one you might not find in your win pictures?

Track photographer Jason Halstead takes numerous photos during the races, and not all of them can make it into the win photos. If you're looking for something frameable from your big race, or of your special horse, email Jason at jjhphoto@gmail.com.

Girls Night Out on Wednesday evenings at ASD was a huge hit in 2025 and will be back for 2026! Click image for full size. (Jason Halstead / Assiniboia Photo)

Prices are excellent! Almost as good as his photos 😊



Click photo to enlarge

A Snapshot in Time by Bob Gates

The Yuletide season had Gary Danelson checking in for some holiday cheer. Gary is pictured here with Sal's Imp, who won 7 of his 10 races in 1964, with 5 of those wins coming at the Downs. The 88-year-old all-time-leading trainer at ASD hinted that he just might be looking for a stablemate for his Winnipeg Futurity winner Omaha Warrior for the 2026 season. Stay tuned! (Bob Barnes Photo)



- \$13.95 Daily Lunch Special
- Happy Hour (3 to 5pm & 9pm to close)
- Daily Evening Specials
- Details at ASDowns.com



J. Keeler Johnson handicaps the \$250,000 Lecomte Stakes (G3) at Fair Grounds on Saturday for the BloodHorse and provides his top three selections.

Picking an 8-1 Shot in the 2026 Lecomte Stakes

The vast majority of early Road to the Kentucky Derby qualifiers award points on a 10-5-3-2-1 basis to the top five finishers. On Saturday at Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots, the stakes will double to 20-10-6-4-2 points for the \$250,000 Lecomte (G3).

The Lecomte has understandably drawn a deep field. Proven stakes winners are few and far between, but a bevy of promising maiden winners add depth to the 11-horse lineup. J. Keeler Johnson handicaps the race and picks an 8-1 shot to win.

-- [BloodHorse](#)

[CLICK FOR FULL STORY](#)



- Wager on Top Tracks
- Simulcast Schedule
- Off-Track Betting Locations





Exciting young prospect Nearly has been listed at 50-1 for the Kentucky Derby in Churchill's pool. (Ryan Thompson/Coglianese Photo)

Kentucky Derby Futures: A Worthy Fave But Much Intrigue as Prep Season Picks Up

One of the most intellectually stimulating and potentially rewarding aspects of following up-and-coming Derby contenders is backing your opinion with a future wager, and there are two ways to do it: betting into Churchill Downs' pari-mutuel pools held during key prep weekends and making a fixed-odds bet via Caesars Sportsbook in Las Vegas.

Churchill's third of six pari-mutuel pools starts Friday, Jan. 16 at noon ET and ends Sunday, Jan. 18 at 6 p.m. ET. Thirty-nine individual horses are offered, plus an "all other 3-year-olds" bet that opens at 4-1 odds.

-- [America's Best Racing](#)

[CLICK FOR FULL STORY](#)



Strategic Risk wins the Smarty Jones Stakes at Oaklawn Park on January 3.

On the Derby Trail: A Test, a Risk and a Tactic

With the first Derby Rankings and the third Future Wager coming up, Hall of Fame writer Steve Haskin takes a look at two proven stakes winners -- Litmus Test and Strategic Risk -- and talks about how they got to where they are on the Derby trail.

Unlike many of the exciting, but inexperienced colts, about to move up in class, these two have already proven to be tough, battle-tested competitors with a strong racing foundation, and one of them has a strong classic pedigree.

-- [Secretariat.com](#)

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Track Historian Bob Gates

The Best of Bob

A newspaper article written 75 years ago was Bob's inspiration for this week's blog. Have you heard of **Slim Keith or Contributor?**

Probably not, but it's such a good story and Bob has it [here](#) (From June 13, 2019).

Feedback & Inside Track Archives

We would love to hear from you! Email your comments and/or suggestions to theinsidetrack@ASDowns.com.

Did you know that past issues of The Inside Track are available on our website?
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Gittens Takes His Talent to the Big Apple

Jan 15, 2026 | Live Horse Racing, The Inside Track



Trainer Devon Gittens with his first “big horse” as a trainer, stakes-winner Purrsistent, owned and bred by Dr. Betty Hughes. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press)

By G.S. Thompson

Following up with trainer Devon Gittens after his successful 2025 seasons at Assiniboia Downs and Woodbine, he is now racing at Aqueduct.

The 41-year-old trainer from Barbados started training horses at Assiniboia Downs in 2019 and immediately showed the talent that has now taken him to Woodbine and most recently to Aqueduct in New York, where he has a 20-horse stable competing against some of the best trainers in North America.

Gittens recently completed his first full season at Woodbine, where he was training a string for Canada's leading owner, Bruno

Schickedanz, who captured his 11th consecutive Woodbine owners' title.

Schickedanz won 79 races during the 2025 season, a large number of which came courtesy of Gittens, who finished fifth in the Woodbine trainer standings with a record of 38-37-20 for purse earnings of \$901,674.

The journey from Gemswick, Barbados to Aqueduct in New York has been one of patience, hard work, and an almost supernatural ability to know when a horse is physically and mentally ready to run. For 14 years, Gittens exercised horses for almost every top trainer at Assiniboia Downs, including the late Ardell Sayler, and Rob Atras, the latter of whom also successfully made the move to the New York circuit about 10 years ago.

Gittens exercised champions including Escape Clause, Balooga Bull, and Magic D'Oro at Assiniboia Downs, to name a few, and learned to recognize talent and readiness in a racehorse. That knowledge has served him well.

When he finally took out his trainer's license in 2019, Gittens won with both of his horses. Longtime Manitoba owner-breeders Dr. Betty Hughes and Frank Johnson took notice and gave Gittens a shot with horses by their relatively unknown stallion Vengeful Wildcat, a decision that would prove transformative for all parties.

Gittens traveled back and forth from Woodbine to Assiniboia Downs during the 2025 season, compiling a record of 13-19-11 locally, highlighted by 2-year-old Mighty Mikee, who won the CTHS Sales Stakes and the Buffalo Stakes by an astounding 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ lengths, the largest winning margin in North America that day. The promising colt, bred by Larry Falloon and owned in partnership with Anne Champion and McLaren Racing.



Mighty Mikee wins the \$40,000 CTHS Sales Stakes. Shavon Belle up. (Jason Halstead / Assiniboia Photo)

Mighty Mikee was given the winter off, but the same can't be said for Gittens, who is showing no signs of slowing down. He's started nine horses at Aqueduct so far this winter and already has a second and three thirds running against trainers like Brad Cox, who has won 11 Breeders' Cup races. Cox claimed a horse named Tabloid Material from Gittens on January 3 for \$20,000. We'll certainly be watching that horse with great interest!

Gittens has spent most of his life with horses and clearly has a natural talent for preparing a horse not only to run, but to want to run and win. One of the most talented trainers we've ever seen at the Downs with first-time starters, Gittens started out as a teenager in Barbados getting on horses in pastures and went on to work at the racetrack there before finding his way to Canada in 2006, thanks to an invitation from Assiniboia Downs CEO Darren Dunn.

"I'm very lucky to have these horses now," Gittens said. "I want to say thanks to Betty and Frank for giving me a chance in the beginning. In Barbados it's much more difficult to get started."

From exercising horses in the early morning mist at Assiniboia Downs to conditioning a 20-horse string for Canada's leading owner at one of racing's most prestigious facilities, Gittens has proven that talent and patience create their own opportunities.

The kid from Barbados who started by climbing on horses in pastures is now competing at the highest level of North American racing.

And he's just getting started.

Opportunities for Aspiring Racehorse Grooms!

Jan 15, 2026 | Live Horse Racing, The Inside Track



Amber Fehr was a successful participant in the 2025 Racehorse Groom Training Program!

For anyone who has ever dreamed of working with racehorses, the HBPA of Manitoba Inc. is offering a unique chance to gain hands-on experience through a 4-week paid training program.

Racehorse Groom Training Program participants will be immersed in barn life, learning everything from feeding and stall care to grooming and basic horse health. Set in busy barn environments, in

all weather conditions, the program allows participants to stay physically engaged while building daily connections with these remarkable animals.

Last year's participants gave the program high praise, noting the valuable skills they gained and the rewarding experience of working with the horses.

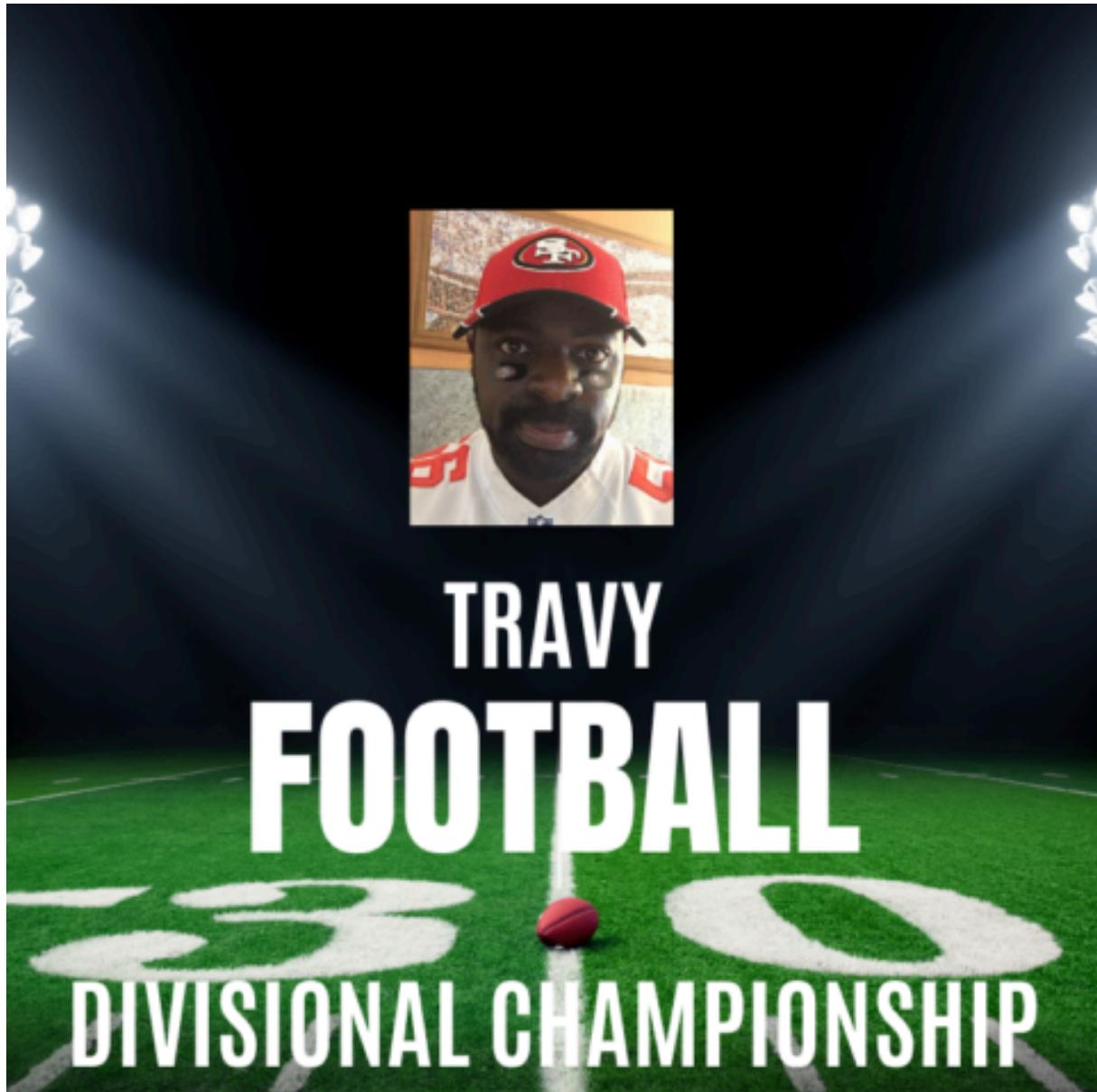
Supported by funding from the Government of Manitoba, the annual program provides an excellent opportunity to explore a career in the racing industry. Open to individuals aged 16–29, the program requires no prior horse experience, but that would be considered an asset.

Further details are available at hbpamanitoba.ca, and applications are NOW BEING ACCEPTED! Interested applicants should submit their materials to hbpamanitoba@mymts.net.

The HBPA encourages readers to share this exciting opportunity with anyone who may be interested!

TravyFootball Divisional Round

Jan 15, 2026 | The Inside Track



By Travers Cummings

Broncos over Bills (Saturday afternoon): Josh Allen is the best player in the NFL, period. As good as he's been, I don't know how many people actually picked them to beat the Jags last week. Jacksonville had all the momentum heading into the game, but with his back against the wall, Josh Allen and the Bills found a way to get

it done. Now they'll head to the divisional round against the number-one-seeded Denver Broncos, who will be well rested since they earned a first-round bye. Even though Buffalo beat the Jags, there were some casualties along the way. Wide receivers Tyrell Shavers and Gabe Davis both tore their ACLs, which is a big blow considering the Bills didn't have the most talented group of pass catchers to begin with. Going against the Broncos' defense, you can't be shorthanded on the offensive side of the ball, and as much of a one-man show as Josh Allen can be, this task might be too much, even for him.

49ers over Seahawks (Saturday evening): Well, who would have thought... I certainly didn't believe San Fran had the personnel or the manpower to handle the Eagles last week, but I will GLADLY accept being wrong in this case. Despite throwing two interceptions, Brock Purdy did what he usually does after adversity—shrug it off and keep on throwing. Leading a perfectly executed, game-winning drive to take a four-point lead, he once again silenced any doubters who STILL question if he's one of the top QBs in the league. Of course, the most talked-about play will be the double-reverse trick pass that Coach Kyle Shanahan pulled out of his bag. Now, a date with a familiar foe is on the horizon, as Seattle will look to secure the rubber-match meeting between these two teams. They played three weeks ago, and the Seahawks pretty much dominated them the entire time. BUT! If it wasn't for a dropped pass by Christian McCaffrey near the end zone that would have led to a touchdown, it could have been a completely different game. I might be going out on a limb picking SF here, but maybe despite all the injuries (they lost George Kittle to a torn Achilles last week), San Fran is just a team of destiny.

Rams over Bears (Sunday night): Ugh... these stupid Chicago Bears. I believe there's a reason and an explanation for everything that exists, but for the life of me, I cannot understand how the Bears manage to come back and win these games all the time. They didn't play well for three and a half quarters against the Packers; they looked awful—bad turnovers, fumbles, nothing was going their way. Then all of a sudden, a switch flipped, and Caleb Williams turned into Joe Montana. At some point, this streak of good fortune has to end, right? Or maybe not. The Rams don't want to be the latest victims of this Bears magic, so they have to come out and score quickly. More so, they can't have their "middle of the game stalls," where they tend to have multiple drives in a row that end in three-and-outs. Matt Stafford injured his finger last week against the Panthers after he smacked it on a helmet on a throw; the coach says he will be good to go, though. Puka Nacua and Davante Adams should have decent games, seeing as the Bears' pass defense isn't that great.

Last week: 1–2