

*(Reprinted from At the Races column in Canstar Community News)*

## **Hollywood scenario unfolds at the Downs**

**By Ivan Bigg**

It reads like a Hollywood script.

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and dreaming of a trip to the Winner's Circle, 39 people pony up \$20,000 in \$500 shares during the winter to become horse owners in a newly-formed Assiniboia Racing Club.

Disaster strikes almost immediately. After a lengthy search, the Club buys a horse at a southern U.S. track, pays the shipping and border fees but the horse soon suffers a stress fracture during a workout, necessitating retirement from racing. Groan.

With just a few thousand dollars left in the Club's kitty, Club coordinator **John Field**, a retired Crown Attorney and now a director in the local horsemen's association, feels the pressure of tracking down a bargain basement buy.

He pins the Club's hopes—and his reputation—on a filly, **Spanish Fowl**, he finds at Woodbine in Toronto. The 3-year-old had finished 6<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> in her first three lifetime starts there but perhaps she would take kindly to lesser competition at the Downs.

Not. She balks at loading into the starting gate then finishes a dismal 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> in her first two starts. Field admits to not having the best of sleeps.

But then, almost miraculously, on her third try as an 11/1 long shot, she shows that she's figured out what the game is all about and makes a run at the leader in the stretch to finish second. Then, a week later, she proves that race was no fluke and she loses by a mere head.

So close yet so far. Then, as if on cue for the Hollywood ending, just as the race season is wrapping up, the filly walks straight into the gate without hesitation—evoking a sigh of relief from the gate crew—and, although stumbling at the start, charges to the lead and wins by a jaw-dropping nine lengths.

Cue tears of joy and delirious high-fiving as the biggest crowd of owners in the 50-day meet pose three-deep for a picture that is sure to become their most treasured possession through the fall and winter.

Horse ownership. The highs, the lows, the grief, the exhilaration. Already others are lining up to share in that experience next year as the Downs revels in a stunningly successful year in which per-race wagering increased by 44 per cent over last year.