



Horsing around

By Sean Chaffin

It is mid-July and the streets of Hatillo are packed with revelers during the town's annual summer festival. Across from the quaint square, people noticeably crowd around a small wooden booth, slapping dollar bills down on a long, red board full of white numbers. As a band plays in the background, a man in a red & blue-striped shirt places dominoes on top of each bet to keep the bills from floating away in the tropical breeze. Behind him, the Pica machine sits waiting for its next race.

Pica is a unique roulette-style horse-racing game. The game has been around for decades and can be seen frequently at festivals, small cantinas, and county fairs. It brings the excitement of horse racing and wagering to small towns throughout the island.

Instead of a white marble rolling around a roulette wheel, however, Pica has a much more ingenious setup. It is a tablelike game in the shape of an octagon. On top are 24 numbered squares divided into four "running lanes." The numbered horses, intricately carved from wood and painted like small works of art, are attached to small metal dowels that carry the race horses 360 degrees around the surface of the machine.

In the Hatillo town square, the Pica wagering is fast and furious. Betting is made somewhat like roulette. Bettors can select an individual number and get paid 20-1 on their wager, if they are lucky enough to select a winner. Other wagers include placing a buck or two on an intersection of four numbered squares, thus claiming four horses. Odds differ on various bets.

After all wagers are made, the *piquero* turns and cranks a handle protruding from the front of the machine. This action spins the horses around the tabletop in a whirl of blurring colors and numbers as spectators look on hoping they have selected correctly. A finish line at the front of the machine is used to determine the winner, the horse closest to the line without going past it.

To many, the Pica horse race is more satisfying than roulette. Gears built inside the machine ensure a slow conclusion to the race. The horses whiz by and slowly the center lane of horses comes to a stop. The next lane then begins to slow to a stop. Onlookers have to wait until the very last row of horses creeps to a stop to determine the winner. The *piqueros* then collect the bets and pay out the winners—and then the betting starts again.

The machine seems to fuse the skill and precision of carpentry and the color and craftsmanship of a dedicated artist. The exact history of the game is difficult to ascertain. However, Puerto Rico's Games of Chance Act of 1948 legalized Pica races when they are held during authorized events. It is a small-stakes game, usually with bets of no more than a few dollars, but it is an interesting piece of Puerto Rican culture and history.

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