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Churchill Downs Upgrades Continue With New First Turn Experience For Kentucky Derby

Tim Newcomb



A rendering of the new First Turn Club at Churchill Downs, opening for the 2023 Kentucky Derby. POPULOUS

There's a fresh stadium experience coming for the 149th running of the Kentucky Derby. As part of a multi-year upgrade to the venue, the 2023 event on May 6 debuts the new First Turn Experience, a 50,000-square-foot hospitality space with an indoor area, trackside viewing and 5,100 additional stadium seats.

As part of the planned upgrades at the Louisville site, Churchill Downs has worked with architect Populous to create a fresh approach while hosting 150,000 guests each year for the Kentucky Derby. The projects started in 2015

and will culminate with updates for the 2024 event. But for 2023, the \$90 million First Turn Experience leads the show.

The new area includes a 2,000-person capacity indoor space dubbed the First Turn Club with an open floorplan meant to be "grand and intimate," Populous says. The premium space was designed with a modern touch in mind. Upon entry, a grand central bar features a mixed metal front and plenty of audio and visual experiences with a 360-degree wraparound LED screen visible from every vantage point. In a nod to the Kentucky Derby's drink of choice, the mint julep, custom brass shelving above the bar will include live mint plants and bourbon bottles.



A rendering of the view from the 5,100 new stadium seats as part of the First Turn Experience.
POPULOUS

Additional design elements include an exposed black ceiling with vintage light fixtures and equestrian styling, industrial details, vintage images from historic races, dark walnut and mixed metals and the distinctive diamond-patterned bar inspired by historic wagering windows.

"One opportunity at the First Turn Club was to create an inviting and intimate space for guests while accommodating the back-of-house operation required to sustain an elevated level of service and very flexible experience, bringing a fantastic new gathering option to Churchill Downs," Mason Paoli, Populous principal, said.

"From the materials and textures to the thoughtful layout and lighting, the First Turn Experience is a seamless extension of the work we have done throughout our relationship with Churchill Downs and will provide enhanced and new experiences for guests," Paoli said.

Churchill Downs expects the floor plan at the First Turn Club to accommodate private events year-round.



The view of the new grandstand and trackside viewing of the Churchill Downs First Turn Experience. POPULOUS

The new club wasn't the only addition to the First Turn Experience for 2023. A new grandstand with 5,100 reserved seats replaces 3,400 temporary Oaks and Derby seats. The venue features a cantilevered canopy above the new permanent stadium seats, along with improved amenities on the concourses.

The club, located underneath the fresh grandstand design, opens to an adjacent trackside viewing terrace. Featuring outdoor seating, multiple concourse levels and hospitality, the space is meant to "preserve intimacy and increase flexibility."



A rendering of the Paddock updates coming to Churchill Downs for 2024.

POPULOUS

"These newly unveiled spaces represent the latest step in the partnership between Populous and Churchill Downs, bringing to life an overall master plan developed by the two in 2016," Kelly Kerns, Populous senior principal, said. "Expressing a common design language throughout, the enhancements serve to strengthen guest experience and honor the tradition, heritage and culture significance of Churchill Downs."

Already completed on site are the 2015 additions of the Turf Club, Stakes Room and Director's Room; the 2017 update of the Starting Gate Suites; the 2018 upgrade of the Colonnade and Rooftop Terrace; and the 2022 addition of the Homestretch Club. For 2024 and the 150th running of the Kentucky Derby comes renovations of the iconic Paddock and restoration of the Twin Spires.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/timnewcomb/2023/05/04/churchill-downs-upgrades-continue-with-new-first-turn-experience-for-kentucky-derby/?sh=5bcbc2a857c1>