



HERALD FILE PHOTO BY FAITH NINIVAGGI

UNTIL NEXT YEAR: Brass Hat's victory in the revived Massachusetts Handicap was the highlight of a successful season at Suffolk Downs, during which attendance and handle increased for the first time in years.

Suffolk success has spirits soaring

By ED GRAY

The 2007 racing season concluded at Suffolk Downs on Saturday, and there was a measure of optimism that had been missing from recent "getaway days" at the old East Boston racetrack.

Richard Fields, a New York resort developer who purchased a significant interest in Suffolk Downs before the meeting got underway in May, is responsible for lifting the spirits of the track's horsemen, employees and bettors.

"As a local horseman and a horseman who's been around for 40 years, I can only thank the man for coming here. Because without him, I don't think we could have made it through this year," said Anthony Spadea, secretary and treasurer of the Massachusetts Thoroughbred Breeders Association.

"Prior management did not have a love for the thoroughbred industry. I think with Richard Fields, the horsemen believe he's a hope for the possibility of stretching out our life span for another couple years, at least."

Not only did racing at Suffolk Downs make it through the 100-day meeting, the track saw increases in attendance and handle for the first time in several years. The average daily attendance increased 22 percent, while the on-track handle for live racing programs increased by 14 percent.

"By every standard, it's been a spectacular year for Suffolk Downs," said Fields, who also

brought the Massachusetts Handicap back to life in September. "We became involved officially a few weeks before the track opened. In that time, the programs we began to initiate have been very successful.

"There's no question we have stopped a trend that was a trend of decline the last eight, nine years. We have been successful in bringing new racing fans to Suffolk Downs. There are not many success stories like that in horse racing, at a track without any gaming component."

Fields, the largest shareholder in Suffolk Downs, said he's hopeful the trend will continue in 2008.

"Going into next year, we're going to have several months when we can program new ideas," he said. "We have some pretty exciting programs that we're going to start working on. I hope the trend continues and we can build on it."

Of course, Fields is well aware that the surest way to secure the future of Suffolk Downs is to be granted the go-ahead to install slot machines or institute casino gaming at New England's only remaining thoroughbred track.

"I clearly don't know how to read the tea leaves, but if you read everybody's statements, everybody from a political standpoint, seems to be open to (expanded gambling in the state) or considering it. The governor has come forward with a program," Fields said.

"We support Mayor (Tom) Menino's position, which is if there's

going to be casino gaming in this jurisdiction, there's no place better than Suffolk Downs."

Spadea, who currently owns at least a share of 18 horses, believes expanded gaming is essential to the welfare of the state's thoroughbred industry.

"I think we all realize that if we don't get some form of gaming or a casino, the future's over here," he said. "Most of us are just pleased right now that we had a place to race this year, but we're looking for Utopia here. We're looking for a 125-day meeting and purses at \$250,000 a day and up."

Tammi Piermarini certainly felt like she hit the jackpot at Suffolk Downs yesterday after being honored as the 2007 meeting's top jockey. While perennial leading trainer John Rigattieri walked away with yet another title, winning a riding title was new territory for the 40-year-old mother of two. Piermarini has been a prominent jockey in New England since beginning her career at Suffolk Downs in 1985, but she had never before won a riding title.

"It's been a long time coming. I've come close in the past, but there was always injury or illness, something that stopped me," she said.

Piermarini, who retired briefly in 1999, will ride at Tampa Bay Downs during the winter, but she already can't wait to defend her title at Suffolk Downs next year.

"The new owner, Mr. Fields, has done a great job — promoting, ad-

vertising, bringing back the (Massachusetts Handicap). It brought back memories of a long time ago," said Piermarini, who rode her 100th winner of the season in Saturday's first race. "When he says something, it's done."

While the horses, trainers and jockeys will be out of action at Suffolk Downs for the winter, Stanley Lojko will continue to frequent the East Boston track to bet on simulcasts from New York. The 83-year-old Salem resident has been attending races at Suffolk since 1941, and he also looks forward to the 2008 meeting with renewed optimism.

"I think they're doing a good job. Things are looking up-and-coming," he said. "But they need help from slots or a casino to get things rolling."