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Jockey Kevin Krigger and Dynapro were wearing plenty of the track's surface after the first race on opening day at Suffolk Downs.

Suffolk opener supplies chills

By Nancy Marrapese-Burrell

GLOBE STAFF

The long-range forecast for yesterday had been for just cloudy skies — no mention of a chilly rain to put a damper on Opening Day at Suffolk Downs.

But the rain did come, the same type of rain that delayed the Red Sox game against the Tampa Bay Rays for 2½ hours Friday night.

Although the warmth and comfort may have been missing, the unpredictable New England weather didn't diminish the enthusiasm racing fans brought to the East Boston track on Kentucky Derby Day.

In addition to the live 10-race card at Suffolk, fans had the chance to wager on the 134th Run for the Roses, won by favorite Big Brown.

"I always come on opening day with my friend and maybe one or two other times during the year," said Jeff Card of Hamilton, who brought his 3½-year-old son, Liam, to the track for the first time. "It's the first time he has ever seen horses like this. He likes it for about five minutes.

"We just came down to kill some time, hang out with friends, and get him out of the house for

a little while."

In addition to the casual observers, there were plenty of hard-core thoroughbred fans. Gary Berman, a personal trainer from Malden, said the start of the season is a rite of spring for him.

"I used to come here when I was a kid," said Berman, 39, who grew up in Revere. "I used to ride for [trainer] Ambrose Pascucci. I come every opening day for Suffolk Downs because I love to see the new people here.

"I'm a big fan of [jockey Tammi] Piermarini. It's funny, every year at this time, you see new people. There are new families. They love the thoroughbreds."

Berman first started going to the track in 1979 when he was a youngster and his mother worked in the backstretch.

"I started working for Ambrose Pascucci in 1980," said Berman, who works at Mike's Gym in Medford. "That's when he had a full line of horses."

At 11, he cleaned the stalls and learned how to bandage the animals. He said the best time of day was dawn before most people were up and going about their business.

"In the backstretch, to see the sun come up, the horses out in the stretch, it's the most gorgeous thing you'll ever see in the morning," he said.

"It's not New York or Hollywood, but the track people are great. These people who work here do it because they love it. It's not just a job to them. They love to be around the horses.

"They're not getting paid a lot of money but it becomes a lifestyle because they love the horses."

For a long time, Berman thought he'd become a horse trainer as opposed to training people but it didn't work out that way. Instead, he's a regular visitor to the place that meant so much to him as a child.

"I've seen a big difference in the last year," said Berman. "They've built it up and they've done a lot more promotions. There is a new owner at the track [Richard Fields]. Security is better now.

"If something goes wrong during a race and [a patron] gets mad [and acts inappropriately], they're gone, they're barred.

"It wasn't like that years ago. Now, today, they want to bring the family atmosphere back. They want to get rid of the bad element."