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For openers, Suffolk Downs primed, ready

By JOHN CONNOLLY

Chip Tuttle sounded like an anxious jockey waiting for the starting gate to spring open.

"We're ready for prime time," Suffolk Downs' chief operating officer said on the eve of the track's 2008 meet opener. "We've put a lot into improving the customer experience and improving the experience for the horsemen and hopefully that will generate into a better racing product, as well. We're looking forward to (today)."

The East Boston track begins its 103-day racing schedule with a 12:55 post time this afternoon. Gates open at 10 a.m. for an opening day that includes a simulcast of the 134th Kentucky Derby.

Purses have been increased by 5 percent and there will be an expanded schedule of nine open stakes races in 2008 highlighted by the \$500,000 Massachusetts Handicap on Sept. 20. Two other major events will be held that day — the \$100,000 James B. Moseley Sprint

and the inaugural \$50,000 Robert M. O'Malley Memorial Stakes, named in honor of the track's longtime executive, who died last year.

For May, live racing will be held every Wednesday and Saturday, including Memorial Day. The usual post time will be 12:45 p.m. Starting June 6, and running through the end of August, the track will conduct a Wednesday-Friday-Saturday-Sunday schedule with the first race on Friday set for 3 p.m. Racing fans will also have an opportunity to get their photo taken with a horse and jockey as part of the new Fan Photo Experience each Saturday, Sunday and holiday.

"The theory is that we hope to catch some people on the way going home to go to the races early," Tuttle said. "They've done it with some success with New York and Southern California and people always like to get their picture in the winner's circle."