

Jockey, Suffolk head to gate

By JOHN CONNOLLY

All jockeys require extremely strong wrists and hands to keep powerful 1,100-pound animals under tight control in a race. Suffolk Downs jockey Tammi Piermarini better have a mighty sturdy right shoulder, as well.

Tonight, the veteran jockey, the leading rider at Suffolk Downs a year ago with 100 wins, will throw out the first pitch at Fenway Park. The appearance will help jump-start Suffolk Downs' 103-day meeting which begins tomorrow and runs through Nov. 8.

Not only is tonight the 41st birthday for Piermarini, who grew up in Newburyport and Salisbury, but it marks her first-ever visit to Fenway Park for a game. Piermarini, who will be accompanied by her husband, John, and 6-year-old daughter, Izabella, will be decked out in full jockey attire for the Fenway occasion. She will sport the racing silks of Red Sox Stables, owned by Scott Savin.

"I'm more excited (about Fenway)," said Piermarini. "We're huge sports fanatics. We go to all the spring training games down in Florida that we can get to. It's a dream come true. I was born and raised in Massachusetts,



PHOTO BY CHIP BOTT

RIDING HIGH: Tammi Piermarini was the leading jockey at Suffolk last year with 100 wins.

north of Boston, but I've never been there for a game. It's tough with that sport and the job we do. The schedule conflicts."

Added her husband, John, "When we're down at Tampa (Bay Downs) we go

to all the games whenever the Red Sox are down there. I've been hundreds of times. It'll be fabulous. We've already been asked by friends and relatives for about 100 tickets."

Piermarini, who missed

much of the 2006 season after giving birth to son Johnny, posted 10 wins in only seven racing days late that season. That jump-started a 2007 season which culminated in her first Suffolk riding title.

This season, the track has bumped up purses by 5 percent, marking the second straight year Suffolk bolstered the total purses. That, combined with refurbishment to the barn areas on the backside, induced trainers from across the country to ship an additional 200 horses to the East Boston oval.

"We might even have more than 200, too," said Piermarini. "There's a lot of old faces back. There's been a lot of changes in the past two years with the purse increase, the playground for the kids that Mr. (Richard) Fields put in last year. There's family weekends. They're going to have clowns and pony rides for kids. I've never seen so many improvements and changes in all my life. Mr. Fields is a marketing genius."

"We have a bunch more riders coming, and with the purse increase, there's stronger fields. It'll be a tough meet."

Veteran trainer George Handy, 84, first began bringing horses to Suffolk Downs in 1946. He stayed through 1973 before moving his operations to New Jersey. Now, he's returned.

"I just came up from Gulfstream Park," said Handy, who will train 15 horses for (breeder-owner) Francis



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**TAMMI PIERMARINI
ON SUFFOLK DOWNS**

McDonald, who owns a farm in Ocala, Fla. "It seems like this new man (Fields) is going to spend a lot of money on having good racing. If we ever get the slots in here, I know the slots would help, too. They've done a lot of changes for the better. I'm kind of anxious to get started. We've got a lot of runners here that we like."

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