

Sports

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Suffolk is at the starting gate

Track to open for 75th season

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A racetrack is where hope lives on even the darkest days, and the mood at Suffolk Downs — despite economic challenges and an uncertain future — is decidedly upbeat as the venerable oval opens its 75th season tomorrow.

"Morale is excellent," said Chip Tuttle, CEO of Sterling Suffolk Racecourse LLC, which owns the track. "We're looking forward to this season on a variety of levels, including celebrating our 75th anniversary. But it's no secret that the stresses and challenges to our racing operation are inextricably linked to progress on the gaming front."

The track's owners and 350 workers — and the approximately 1,000 people who derive at least a portion of their living from the racing operations — are holding their breath to see what type of gambling bill emerges at the State House. The bill passed by the House April 14 would license two resort-style casinos and allow up to 3,000 slot machines at the state's four race-

tracks. Suffolk, besides being eligible for up to 750 slot machines under the bill, is also partnering with Wonderland Park in an effort to land a casino license.

The Senate is expected to take up the bill in a few weeks.

Tuttle said Suffolk's owners remain committed to building and operating a world-class entertainment complex that would combine restaurants, retail, racing, gaming, and a hotel.

Meanwhile, the business of racing goes on. Tomorrow's nine-race live card (free admission,

1:15 p.m. start time) will be augmented by simulcasting the Preakness Stakes, among other races. Suffolk is accepting wagers on the race starting today.

Live racing at Suffolk was moved back from its usual start on Kentucky Derby Day, which Tuttle said had to do with geography and the economy, noting that many stables are coming from Florida meets that have just closed and take time to get here.

"Just to get here from Florida, they have to pass several tracks whose purses are much higher than ours," he said. "We may be paying half the purse those tracks pay for the same level of race."

Suffolk is holding to the \$90,000 daily purse structure it had in 2009. Tuttle noted that Penn National, Charles Town, Presque Isle Downs, Delaware Park, and Philadelphia Park — all tracks Suffolk competes with for horses — have daily purse structures ranging from \$178,000 to \$289,000, all augmented by gaming revenues.

Suffolk can house 1,100 horses but last year peaked at about 1,000. This year, Suffolk will open with 800 horses.

Trainer John Assimakopoulos, 53, is one of the principals of the Yasou Stable, along with his father Charles, 77. The Fitchburg natives return to Suffolk each season with their powerful collection of runners, even though they could be making more money elsewhere.

"This is our home, and there's nothing more powerful than home or family," said John Assimakopoulos. "We're going to stick it out, anyway it goes."

He credited Richard Fields, the track's principal shareholder, with keeping Suffolk going during tough economic times. "Without him, we wouldn't have a shot and I believe in him. We want to be loyal, and there's lots of good people at Suffolk Downs."

What happens on Beacon Hill in the next few months may also determine what happens with

the MassCap, Suffolk's signature race, which has been won by Riva Ridge, Cigar, Skip Away, and the legendary Seabiscuit. The race was suspended in 2009 and that money was redeployed to shore up purses and save jobs, according to track officials.

Tuttle said the track is in a "holding pattern" when it comes to stakes and the MassCap, pending a gambling bill.

Tomorrow will feature a host of fan-friendly activities and patrons can purchase a season pass for \$5, with all proceeds supporting the track's thoroughbred retirement programs.

Live racing will also be held May 19, May 23, May 26, and May 29. Starting Memorial Day, May 31, the track will begin a Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-Saturday schedule, with a first-race post time of 12:45 p.m.

No one knows what will happen with the gambling bill, but there is hope throughout thoroughbred racing.

"I believe our time's coming and we're going to save an industry and its jobs, and create new jobs," said John Assimakopoulos. "I could have four or five new owners tomorrow if we had slots. They don't want a guarantee they'll make money, just a chance. And we just want a chance to show what New England racing could really be like."