

Suffolk opens in style

By Rich Fahey
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

There's an old saying among horse players that goes something like this: The best thing in the world is a winning day at the track; the second-best thing is a losing day at the track.

So, by those calculations, and given the brilliant spring day, the crowd of 11,212 (admission was free) attending the opening day of Suffolk Downs's 75th season yesterday should have had a good time.

On the crowded track apron, attendees posed for pictures with thoroughbreds, and cheered as Thomas P. Martin's I Testify, a 10-year-old gelding ridden by Tammi Piermarini, was the first winner of the 2010 season.

It was not your usual crowd of cigar-chomping regulars. A quartet of Boston College graduates enjoying beers on the sun-splashed apron represented a demographic — young, educated, with disposable income — that track owners are eager to attract.

This marked the third straight year the four twentysomethings — Craig VonAhn, Steve Naclerio, and Dan MacIsaac all of Charlestown, and Ryan Clement of the North End — came to Suffolk on Preakness Day.

They also were celebrating Naclerio's recent birthday.

"I guess I'm kind of the organizer," said VonAhn. "It's become a tradition now."

He said the addition of slots or a casino to the racing — something the track is pushing for — might mean more visits to Suffolk for casual fans such as himself.

Clement said he would support a casino, "and if they eventually had betting on sports and boxing, that would be great."

Many patrons signed petitions asking the state Senate to approve a House-passed bill that would legalize up to 750 slot machines at Suffolk and the possibility of the track landing one of the two casino licenses in the House bill. Track officials have said the future of the track may depend on other gambling revenues to augment the existing \$90,000-a-day purse structure.

The track put its best foot forward yesterday, including the presence of renowned track bugler Jason Rambler of the All-Star Buglers, who performed the national anthem and calls to the post.

Rambler said there's something special about a live bugler in an era where at many tracks the call to the post is recorded.

"It just doesn't seem right," said Rambler.

At big events such as the Breeders' Cup, Rambler said the pressure is on with many millions of people watching on television, waiting for him to cough out a bad note.

"It's fun, but nerve-racking," he said. "It's what I do."

The reawakening of thoroughbred racing after a six-month slumber can lead to uncertain moments for even experienced Suffolk employees.

"I have opening-day jitters just like anyone else," said track announcer T.D. Thornton, beginning his 16th season. "Once I get that first race under my belt, it's like riding a bike."

The Plymouth County Sheriff's Department's mounted patrol took part in ceremonies before the first race.

The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation and Suffolk Downs, through support from the Fields Family Foundation, established a home for retired racehorses at the Plymouth County Sheriff's Farm in November. Inmates from the Plymouth County Correctional Facility care for the horses.

Five horses arrived at the farm last fall and two — Charlie Business and Sing Me Back Home — were recently adopted and are in their second career as trail horses.

"We'd like to give these inmates a chance to do something with their lives when they get out of prison — perhaps in the equine field," said Richard Fields, Suffolk's principal shareholder.

Suffolk will hold live racing on May 19, 23, 26, and 29 before beginning a Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday-Saturday schedule Memorial Day.