

SUFFOLK DOWNS **NORTHEAST** SPOTLIGHT

Lone remaining jewel

Suburban Boston racetrack celebrates 75th anniversary in 2010 with 101-day race meeting

BY STEVE MYRICK

SUFFOLK DOWNS is squared between an industrial oil tank farm, a large metropolitan airport, and a golden salt marsh that rolls out to the Atlantic Ocean.

For 75 years, people have loved and hated it, praised and cursed it, flocked to it and abandoned it, owned it, sold it, and shut it down. To be sure, fewer people have strong emotions today.

Suffolk Downs saw its heyday with champions like Seabiscuit, Whirlaway, War Admiral, and John Henry thrilling capacity crowds. It saw a revival, with Cigar and Skip Away rekindling the excitement. Now 75 years after the tumultuous started turning, Suffolk Downs is poised on the brink, with its future largely in the hands of state legislators who could decide this spring whether to sanction video slot machines or a full-scale resort casino at the track.

Part of the picture

The track has played more than a bit role in the American racing stage. It was here that the legendary champion Seabiscuit plodded his way through a thoroughly undistinguished juvenile campaign, and it was here that Seabiscuit caught,

and held, the eye of trainer Tom Smith in the paddock, somehow communicating unfathomable greatness. (No, that did not happen at Saratoga Race Course, as was depicted in the hit movie.) Seabiscuit's legend really began to roll when he won the 1937 Massachusetts Handicap in record time.

"Big Jim" Hansen, a track fixture still popular with fans, saw a big part of the track's history. With an infectious booming bass voice, Hansen called the races at Suffolk and most of the other tracks on the New England circuit for more than 40 years. He will forever be associated in New England with perhaps the most thrilling MassCap ever run. In 1987, national star Broad Brush, with Angel Cadenas Jr. in the irons, was the headliner of the Grade 2 event. Local favorite Waquoit, with Boston native Chris McCarron in the saddle and jockey of McCarron on the rail, promised a challenge. The two colts hooked up entering the stretch, and hard-core racing fans can recall Hansen's call in the same way they remember Johnny Most's "Hardluck side the hill"—in the 1965 Eastern Conference final game between the Boston Celtics and Philadelphia 76ers.

"They're into the stretch for the money," Hansen's voice boomed,



Broad Brush (outside) and Waquoit stage memorable battle in 1987 Massachusetts Handicap, with Waquoit prevailing by a nose



Suffolk Downs, which once hosted one of the final performances of the Beatles, has a storied history and uncertain future as the lone Thoroughbred racetrack still in operation in New England

"They battle at the farling pole. Now it's Broad Brush, and Waquoit. Broad Brush a short lead, Waquoit hangin' on the wood. Broad Brush and Waquoit, look at 'em come. Ding-dong battle to the wire, Waquoit, Broad Brush," Hansen said, his bass voice rising to near-soprano excitement. Waquoit emerged the victor, winning by a nose.

Northern exposure

If it seems like there has been a Pini in charge of something at Suffolk Downs forever, well there has. Steve Pini began his career at the track when he was still in high school. In 1936, his father began work at the track and would spend 40 years as a foreman. Pini's grandfather was there the day the plant opened in 1935. Steve Pini was promoted to track superintendent in 1985, and has worked ever since to hold the deep, sandy track together in the harshest of New England weather conditions.

"Going from ice to rain back to snow again, then freezing temperatures," Pini said. "There were days I was there seven days a week, day and night. In 1996 we had 125 inches of snow, we were getting

whacked with a storm every other day, just one after another."

Pini was one of a very few Suffolk employees who kept their jobs during the darkest period in the track's history. In 1989, controversial track owner Edward G. "Buddy" Levoux, mired in a complex web of debts and deals with dozens of businesses he owned, closed the track.

"I stuck it through the two years, maintained the grounds, made sure everything didn't go to pieces," Pini said.

The track reopened for racing in 1992, under the banner of Sterling Suffolk Racecourse Ltd., guided by veteran General Manager Lou Raffeito. It was Raffeito's revival of the MassCap in 1995, with some very creative bonus money incentives, that brought back a glimpse of the glory days. Cigar's 16-race win streak includes two MassCap victories, and Skip Away won it back in 1997 and '98. The signature race has been sacrificed in three of the past four years, however, as the track struggled to maintain overnight purses.

In 2007, real estate and casino developer Richard Field stepped in and purchased a controlling inter-

est in the track. While making some capital improvements and promising stability, Field has focused on developing a casino on the site.

Anything could happen

Suffolk has always had a penchant for unusual, bizarre, and downright wacky events that spaced up the last 75 years.

There was, for instance, track owner Bill Vuck, who promoted a free turkey giveaway on Thanksgiving. With the 25 winners lined up and waiting, he gave them their prizes, turning live turkeys loose in the grandstand for the lucky ticket holders to catch.

Then there was the day in 1982 when the first-floor clubhouse resembled the OK Corral, when two men tried to settle a grudge with gunfire, while taking cover behind the concrete columns.

For many people, Suffolk is associated with pounding hooves, but with knee-weakening chords. On an August night in 1966, the Beatles performed on a hastily constructed stage near the sixteenth pole, in front of 25,000 screaming fans. It was one of the last times the group performed together.

Now the only Thoroughbred track left in New England, Suffolk has settled into a summer racing meet. The track usually opens for live racing the day of the Kentucky Derby (G1), but this year opening day was pushed forward to May 15, Preakness Stakes (G1) day. Track management projects \$90,000 in purses, the same as last year, will be distributed daily over the 101-day meet.

Suffolk has yet to announce its stakes schedule, but the track has promised to stage a series of events throughout the year to commemorate its 75th anniversary. ❖

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