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Nobody's downcast at Suffolk

By Mark Blaudschun

GLOBE STAFF

They came to celebrate Suffolk Downs yesterday at the Boston Harbor Hotel. Lunch for the Suffolk family, friends, and assorted guests, a video highlighting a place where Seabiscuit and Cigar made their marks, and lots of chatter about an industry that is, at the very least, changing.

A recently as a year ago, it might have been more of a wake for the track in East Boston. But yesterday, it had a livelier feel, filled with greater expectations as Suffolk prepares for its 72d opening a week from Saturday.

"Everybody has a story," said the track's principal owner, Richard Fields. "Suffolk Downs is part of this community."

Fields, whose Coastal Development offered the latest lifeline to the financially strapped track a year ago, talked about a plan he hopes is part of the continued revival of Suffolk, and as well as thoroughbred racing in New England.

"We want to create new customers," he said. "The only way we can succeed is if we attract new customers."

Outlined in the plan was:

■ A 5 percent increase in overnight purses, which combined with a 12 percent increase last year should increase the size of the fields. "Bettors like full fields," said Chip Tuttle, Suffolk's chief operating officer.

■ Seven new stakes races, again designed to increase the size and quality of the fields.

■ A new schedule with live racing on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, which Suffolk officials hope will draw a more family-oriented crowd.

■ A Friday post time of 3 p.m. during the summer, again designed to increase the core fan base. As part of the family-friendly environment there will an outdoor patio and a Family Fun Day every Sunday, with assorted entertainment and guests in addition to the races.

■ A partnership with the Mas-

sachusetts Lottery Commission to have a Keno-type game with Suffolk Downs branding.

■ An agreement with the TVG horse racing network to broadcast 60 percent of Suffolk's races, which should generate additional simulcast wagering lost when Suffolk gave up its card on Tuesdays (normally a dark day at many tracks).

■ A continuation of the Massachusetts Handicap Sept. 20, five weeks before the Breeders' Cup as an enticement for owners to use it as a prep race.

Make no mistake, without the approval of slot machines or other gambling elements, Suffolk, like many tracks, is still facing an uphill battle.

"It's not an even playing field," said Fields of competing against other gaming facilities on the East Coast that have slot machines. "But we're doing everything we can to make it work."

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