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Racing was fair game to them

Early exposure sparked interest

By Joe Sullivan
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These days the Marshfield Fair is all about plump pumpkins, rickety-looking amusement rides, a little bluegrass music, and farm animals neatly manicured by 4-H members.

It's not obvious, but there are remnants of wooden structures that used to house thoroughbred horses that raced around the half-mile oval until racing was discontinued in 1992.

A smile crosses Bill Corrigan's face as he thinks back to the 1970s. "My dad took me to the Marshfield Fair every year," he said. "We went every day for two weeks during the summer. My dad would give me \$5 and say, 'I don't want to see you for another two races.' He was handicapping with his buddies.

"He would always buy us lunch prior to the races, because, as he put it, 'we might not have it on the way out of there.' Invariably, we'd usually win and then hit Dan the Candy Man [an arcade game], where my dad would spend as much trying to win our family hordes of candy as he had at the mutuel windows."

Around the same time, Don Levesque was in his late teens working as a cook at the Barnyard Tavern in Norwell when another cook arrived from work, bragging about hitting the daily double at the Marshfield Fair. "That's first time I heard about it," said Levesque.

Those first sparks of playing the horses eventually led Levesque and Corrigan to horse own-



BILL DENVER/EQUI-PHOTO

Cuba, with Pedro Cotto Jr. up, won the Charles Hesse III Handicap at Monmouth. He'll try to annex the MassCap today.

ership, and they will be running their 7-year-old Cuba in this afternoon's Massachusetts Handicap (5:45, TVG). Cuba was 6-1 on the morning line, the third choice behind Commentator (3-5) and Dr. Pleasure (7-2).

Marshfield was part of a horse racing circuit of Massachusetts fairs that included Brockton, Great Barrington, Northampton, Topsfield, and Weymouth. What used to be the Weymouth Fairgrounds is now a housing development, and across the street is a tavern called J.P. Greer's. Corrigan stopped in one night in 2003 and ran into an old buddy, Bill Thomas, from Holbrook. "He says there's a guy in here who trains horses," said Corrigan. "I said, 'Get out of here, in this little place?' That was Bobby Dibona.

"I already had a trainer [Tim

Hills], but Bobby put on the sales pitch and gave me his card. He said Tim was a good trainer but if I ever wanted to change . . ."

Dibona grew up in Weymouth and knows a little bit about fair racing. "I don't remember, but I know my father took me to the Weymouth Fair when I was really little," said Dibona, who now lives in Florida and races at Gulfstream Park in the winter and at Monmouth Park in New Jersey in the summer.

Eventually, Corrigan switched to Dibona and the partnership (under the name of Leo-Sag Stable; Dibona also owns a piece of Cuba with Corrigan and Levesque) has worked out well.

"This season, we've won 32 races from 87 starts," said Corrigan.

The trio developed a strategy

Joe Sullivan's MassCap picks

1. Commentator: He's justifiably a big favorite coming off a huge victory at Saratoga. Plus, he's been training exceptionally well.

2. Cuba: The former claiming horse is capable of getting second-place money.

3. Dr. Pleasure: How much has throat surgery improved this horse? Not enough to beat Commentator.

of claiming horses in California, because they feel there are bargain prices on high-quality animals, then bringing them back east to race. "We claimed a horse, Yes Master, for \$32,000 at Del Mar," said Corrigan. "We brought him back to the East Coast, raced him seven times, won three races, finished second three times. Then the horse was claimed for \$62,500. We took the money from that to claim Cuba."

Dibona claimed Cuba for \$18,000 at Gulfstream in February, and since then, the horse has won five of seven races while leaving the claiming ranks behind. Cuba won the \$100,000 Charles Hesse III Handicap for New Jersey-breds at Monmouth Aug. 3, then really stepped up in class in the \$300,000 Grade III Iselin Handicap. He finished fifth, 5/8 lengths behind solid stakes horses Honest Man and Grasshopper. "With a clear shot, he would have been the winner," said Dibona.

Corrigan explained further, "He was third along the rail, he always makes one big move, but when he needed to do that, there were two horses outside him. Cuba was all full of run but had nowhere to go. He doesn't like to have horses in front of him. It's almost like he gets mad."

Dibona, Corrigan, and Levesque were impressed enough with the effort to try the \$500,000 MassCap and tangle with Commentator, who is coming off a 4 1/2-length victory in the Grade I Whitney Handicap at Saratoga.

"If Commentator brings his 'A' game, we're all running for second," said Corrigan, "but Cuba is on the top of his game and we're very high on this horse."