



COMMENTATOR, with jockey John Velazquez up, cruises past the field of the 66th MassCap yesterday at Suffolk Downs. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MASSCAP

Making quite a statement

By ED GRAY

Commentator cruises to record victory

Commentator not only carried the stable colors of owner Tracey Farmer to a record-smashing 14-length triumph in the \$500,000 Massachusetts Handicap yesterday, the valiant 7-year-old gelding also carried the torch in trainer Nick Zito's ongoing crusade against the slaughter of horses.

One of the over-riding reasons that Zito opted to enter Commentator in the 66th running of the MassCap was the zero-tolerance policy that Richard Field's ownership team at Suffolk Downs instituted this year to take the lead within the thoroughbred industry against the cruel slaughter of horses.

Following the winner's circle presentation, Zito dedicated Commentator's popular victory in front of 17,712 to a late former client, John Hettinger, who was a pioneer in the fight against the slaughter of horses.

"Nobody says you're not supposed to euthanize a horse, nobody says that. The problem you've got is, it's one of the ugliest things, horse slaughter," said Zito, whose wife, Kim, has also taken an active role in the fight to bar horse slaughter. "Mr. Fields, what he's done at Suffolk Downs, he should be commended."

Commentator's victory hardly came as a surprise to bettors who made him their 1-10 favorite, which matched the great Cigar's record low payoff of \$2.20 in 1996. The only graded-stakes winner in the field of seven that included five horses that had run in at least one claiming race, Commentator enjoyed a victory that was more symbolic than dramatic.

"Commentator will carry the torch (against horse slaughter) un-

til ... whenever," Zito said of his ageless gelding who notched his 13th victory in 20 lifetime races.

The son of Distorted Humor, whose popularity with show bettors resulted in a \$98,460 show pool, carried the torch in style.

After breaking alertly from the starting gate, jockey John Velazquez reacted like the world-class rider he is when longshot Riversrunylee was gunned to the lead from the outside. The multiple Eclipse Award-winning jockey eased his speedy mount back slightly, long enough to let the longshot get to the lead, so that he could ease Commentator to the outside of the pacesetter heading into the first lead.

The race was merely a formality thereafter, as Commentator stalked the pace along the back-

stretch before jetting to the lead and pulling away to the largest margin of victory in MassCap history, easily besting the former record of Menow, who won by eight lengths in 1938.

Won Awesome Dude, ridden by Casey Lambert, finished second, a length ahead of Cuba and jockey Pedro Cotto Jr. Dr. Pleasure, the 4-1 second choice, finished fourth another 3½ lengths back.

Commentator, whose career has been interrupted with injuries on several occasions, is enjoying a banner year in 2008, in which he's won four of five starts, including the Grade 1 Whitney Handicap at Saratoga in his previous start on July 26.

"He's got to be one of the all-time favorites. He ranks up there

now with all the great ones," Zito said. "I love the tradition of races. The horses that have run up here in Massachusetts, just to be in that league with some of the greats that have run here, it's a real honor."

Commentator earned \$300,000 for his record MassCap victory, boosting his career earnings to more than \$1.8 million. The win also places him in the top-10 nationwide in purse earnings in 2008.

Zito, who sang the praises of the Suffolk Downs dirt racing surface, said he would wait before making a decision whether to send Commentator to Santa Anita for the Breeders' Cup Classic, for which he won a berth yesterday as the MassCap was designated as Breeders' Cup Challenge event. Zito is also an outspoken critic of artificial racing surfaces, such as the one recently installed at Santa Anita.