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## Zito's Challenge: Leave 'em in dirt

By ED GRAY

### MASSCAP

Saturday's \$500,000 Massachusetts Handicap has been designated as a Breeders' Cup Challenge race, meaning that the winner of Suffolk Downs' signature race earns an automatic berth into the Breeders' Cup Classic at Santa Anita Park on Oct. 25.

Should Commentator, however, prevail as the likely odds-on favorite in the field of seven entered yesterday, the win-and-you're-in format would be more accurately described as a win-and-there's-a-slight-chance-you're-in proposition. The explosive 7-year-old gelding would have to win the MassCap in mighty impressive fashion for his Hall of Fame trainer to even entertain the notion of taking him cross country to California to compete for the first time on an artificial racing surface.

Nick Zito has been an outspoken critic of the trend toward converting conventional dirt racetracks to artificial surfaces, such as the one installed at Santa Anita. Commentator has performed at such a high level on conventional tracks for so many years, winning 12-of-19 starts on dirt, that his trainer would understandably be hesitant to try his old horse on new tracks.

Racing at Suffolk Downs as the 3-5 morning-line favorite will afford Commentator the opportunity to kick some real dirt in the faces of his six outclassed rivals.

Although the racing career of the son of Distorted Humor has been interrupted by injuries, the long gaps of inactivity have seemingly allowed the New York-bred gelding to continue to

### MASS HANDICAP LINES

The 66th running of the Massachusetts Handicap; Purse: \$500,000, Distance: 1 1/8 miles, 3 YO's & Up.

| PP HORSE           | WGT | JOCKEY     | ODDS |
|--------------------|-----|------------|------|
| 2 Commentator      | 122 | Velazquez  | 3-5  |
| 6 Dr. Pleasure     | 112 | Velasquez  | 7-2  |
| 4 Cuba             | 112 | Cotto      | 6-1  |
| 3 Won Awesome Dude | 112 | Lambert    | 8-1  |
| 7 Riverrunrylee    | 112 | Gonzalez   | 15-1 |
| 1 Beck and Call    | 110 | Piermarini | 20-1 |
| 5 Volcanic Force   | 110 | Dooley     | 20-1 |

compete at thoroughbred racing's highest level at age 7.

"He has a little Seabiscuit in him," owner Tracy Farmer said in a conference call, alluding to the celebrated 1937 MassCap hero. "He has that determination in him."

Commentator may not have attracted the attention of reigning Horse of the Year Curlin or Kentucky Derby winner Big Brown this year, but he has run faster, according to speed-figure gurus.

Commentator will be hard-pressed Saturday to duplicate his most recent performance in the Grade 1 Whitney Handicap, in which he set a brisk pace to score a brilliant triumph by nearly five lengths under jockey John Velazquez, who will have the return mount in the MassCap. Although the old gelding has enjoyed much of his success at distances of a mile and under, he has scored twice in the Whitney — a race he first won in 2004 — at the MassCap distance of 1 1/8 miles.

With a good break from the starting gate, Commentator should once again be the horse to catch on Saturday, and then he just might give Zito something to think about.