

The SARATOGIAN SPORTS

Thursday, September 18, 2008

Saratogian.com

HORSE RACING

Suffolk Downs setting a new example

— Horse track takes lead with no-slaughter policy

By JIMMY GOLEN

The Associated Press

BOSTON — When Suffolk Downs decided to ban from its backstretch those who sell their horses for slaughter, the goal was to save a few animals or a

few dozen that might otherwise wind up as food.

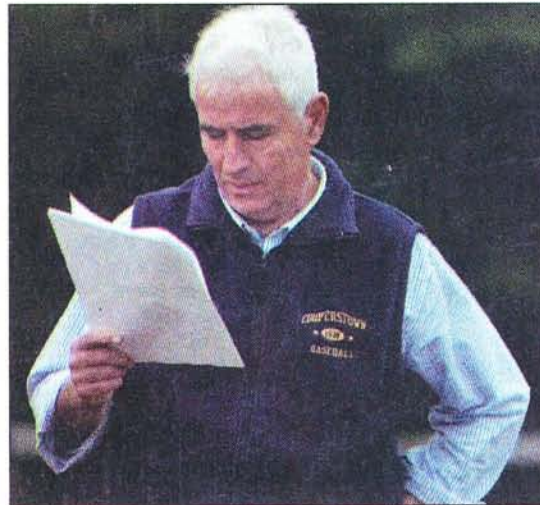
Nick Zito is showing his support in the best way he can.

The Hall of Fame trainer said he is bringing speedy 7-year-old Commentator to Suffolk Downs for Saturday's Massachusetts Handicap in part because of the track's out-in-front stance against slaughtering horses.

"It's a big issue in our industry," Zito told The Associated Press in a telephone interview after the MassCap draw on Wednesday. "That's one of the reasons we like the people up there."

Thoroughbred racing shows millions on a potential

Please see SUFFOLK, Page 8B



Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito is running 7-year-old Commentator in Saturday's MassCap at Suffolk Downs in part because of the track's stand against thoroughbred slaughter.

ED BURKE
The Saratogian

SUFFOLK: Looking out for the thoroughbreds



AP
Commentator, with John Velazquez aboard, wins the 81st running of the Whitney at Saratoga Race Course in July. Suffolk Downs' zero-tolerance toward horse slaughter has saved dozens of animals and had an unintended benefit on the track as well: Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito is bringing speedy 7-year-old Commentator to the Massachusetts Handicap this year, in part because of his support for the policy.

Continued from 1B

Triple Crown winner, then millions more on the top breeding stock when the time comes to retire them from racing. But lesser horses who can't command big stud fees face a less glorious future: The lucky ones might get a peaceful retirement at a farm or riding stable, but others are shipped off to auction and then, sometimes, to the slaughterhouse.

"It's ridiculous. It's not a nice thing," Zito said. "The humane thing to do is to euthanize them if you have to."

Slaughter has always been one possible ending for thoroughbreds, but it became a bigger issue five years ago when it was discovered that 1986 Kentucky Derby winner Ferdinand had probably been rendered into pet food. Two years ago, a double-decker trailer taking 41 horses to an Illinois slaughterhouse crashed onto its side and killed 16 of them.

Driven in large part by Suffolk Downs investor Richard Fields, the track took the lead on the issue last year when it adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward those who slaughter horses. If a horse that ended its career at Suffolk Downs winds up being slaughtered, the trainer and owner would have its stalls at the track stripped away forever.

"It was really just to let people know how serious we were. We let our owners and trainers know we hold them accountable," said Chip Tuttle, the chief operating officer at Suffolk Downs. "There's a difference between livestock and thoroughbreds raised for racing. We wanted to make sure that no horses left Suffolk Downs and ended up shipped to Canada for rendering."

The policy does not apply to the sometimes gruesome tradition of euthanizing a horse on the track if it breaks down during a race. Instead, it rules out the possibility that horses stabled at the track — about 950 of them — will be

processed into food if they don't find a spot to retire when their racing careers are over.

Fields is also getting involved in a more direct way: He has adopted four retiring horses for his Wyoming ranch and contributed \$80,000 in the past two years to programs that provide a home for retired thoroughbreds. Other money is raised at the track, by selling club tables on MassCap day and by charging horsemen \$6 a horse to use the equine exercise machine on the backstretch.

So far, Zito said no other track has gone as far as Suffolk Downs.

"The New York tracks, I don't think they believe in it," Zito said. "I'm sure other tracks will join forces. I'm sure other tracks will come up with something."

This year's MassCap offers the winner an automatic berth into the Breeders' Cup Classic at Santa Anita on Oct. 25. Commentator already earned a Breeders' Cup slot by winning a second straight Whitney Handicap at Saratoga. He drew the No. 2 post position in the MassCap draw on Wednesday and was made the 3-5 favorite in the seven-horse field.

"The fact that Commentator is coming for the Massachusetts Handicap is an unexpected benefit of our leadership position on this issue," Tuttle said.

A gelding with no future as a stud, Commentator will be back in the Whitney next year for a try at a third victory, Zito said. Owner Tracy Farmer admitted he's surprised the horse is still running strong at 7.

"I thought he would be retired by now. He'll let us know when it's time," he said. "I would say, at this time, he feels the best and he looks the best and he works the best that he ever has in his entire career. He's at the top of his game. I would never have believed it."