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Two stakes going separate ways

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NEW YORK — The Massachusetts Handicap at Suffolk Downs and the Brooklyn Handicap at Belmont, both of which will be run Saturday, are ancient and historic races with one foot in the grave, but at least one of them is headed in the right direction and climbing out.

That would be the Mass Cap, first run in 1935 with an honor roll of winners including Seabiscuit (1937), Whirlaway (1942), Stymie (1947), Riva Ridge (1973), Cigar (1995-96), and Skip Away (1997-98), but blank spaces next to eight of the last 17 years. Due to financial woes at Suffolk, the race was not run for five years from 1990 through 1994, and disappeared again in 2003, 2005, and 2006.

It is back this year and with a purse of at least \$500,000, because of new ownership and the possibility of slots at Suffolk in the years ahead. Richard Fields, the casino developer who is also a principal of the Excelsior group seeking a racing or slots foothold in New York, backed a

purchase of the track earlier this year and has led a slots push that may actually have a chance after two decades of failure. Earlier this week, Governor Deval Patrick announced he wants to legalize casino gambling at three locations, and Fields has proposed a Suffolk racino with all the usual goodies — a resort hotel, upscale shopping, a raft of new jobs for the surrounding community, and a major upgrade to purses at Suffolk, where many cards are now filled with low-level conditioned claiming races for statebreds and castoffs from more lucrative circuits.

The Mass Cap carries no graded status this year because of its most recent hiatus, but attracted an interesting field in which Fairbanks is the 7-5 favorite, and Grade 1 winners Brass Hat and Evening Attire will try to recapture some past glory days. Fields says the Mass Cap is back to stay, though everything clearly hinges on the slots. His Plan B is likelier to be a real-estate sale than a long-term subsidy of Massachusetts racing at its current levels.

The Brooklyn has been around even longer, since 1887. Whirlaway and Stymie won it in the same years as their Mass Cap triumphs, and other Hall of Fame winners include Exterminator, Discovery, Tom Fool, Buckpasser, and Damascus. Back

then it was usually a summer race, and part of the old handicap triple crown along with the Met Mile and the Suburban. First place was worth as much as \$249,000 in the 1980s, but Saturday's rendition offers the winner only \$90,000 from a \$150,000 purse.

Its new placement on the Belmont calendar is peculiar, coming just eight days before the Jockey Club Gold Cup and thus clearly not intended to draw the top horses being pointed for that \$750,000 race. It instead has been recast as yet another undemanding Breeders' Cup prep, and a way for trainers to continue keeping top horses apart until the Classic. That's exactly how Todd Pletcher is using it, running Any Given Saturday there to keep him out of barnmate Lawyer Ron's way in the Gold Cup.

Any Given Saturday will be around 25 in a five-horse field where all four of his opponents were beaten 10 or more lengths in their last start. The 3-year-olds Hellsinki and Sightseeing were a distant third and fourth in Street Sense's Travers, Awesomeness Twisted was beaten a combined 28 lengths in the Whitney and Forego, and Tasteville lost by 20 in his only graded stakes start.

So the once-mighty Brooklyn probably amounts to a paid workout for Any Given Saturday, a horse who

should have run in races like the Travers and the Gold Cup after winning the Dwyer and Haskell with complete authority. Instead, he waited seven weeks for this soft spot, then will wait five more until the Classic.

He's the poster boy for how the Breeders' Cup, grand a day as it is, can wreck the rest of the racing calendar if there's no incentive to win more than one showdown to be crowned a champion. It will be interesting to see what happens at the polls if Any Given Saturday were to win the Classic. While some voters would automatically ink him in as the champion 3-year-old and Horse of the Year, others might hesitate. Street Sense beat him both times they met this year, in the Tampa Bay and Kentucky derbies, and Any Given Saturday will have skipped the Preakness, Belmont, Travers, and Gold Cup en route to his single-minded goal. Saying that he also "beat older horses in the Brooklyn," should he win Saturday, shouldn't count for much, given what the race has become.

There has to be a better place for the Brooklyn on the stakes schedule in future years than up against the Mass Cap and the Gold Cup. Big races are supposed to bring good horses together, not keep them apart.