

Suffolk Downs looks to get back on track



By Bill Finley
Special to ESPN.com
([Archive](#))

The governor of Massachusetts, a fellow by the name of Deval Patrick, may not fully understand this, but he can help turn Suffolk Downs into a thriving racetrack with slot machines or he can destroy it. There really aren't any other possibilities, and that's a scary thought. Can we really expect a politician to understand how important this place is, how special it is and how it must stay around forever? Let's hope that the answer is yes.

I understand this is not Saratoga or Keeneland I am talking about and that racing there is about as cheap as it gets these days, but I have always had a very soft spot in my heart for Suffolk Downs. Some of the best years of my life were spent there. To a college student coming of age in Boston in the eighties, there was no place I'd rather be. There was no simulcasting, phone betting or Internet wagering back then, so if you wanted to play the horses you had to take the Blue Line out to East Boston. It was a trip I made hundreds of times, regardless of whether my class schedule called for me to be somewhere else.

Why? It wasn't just about the chance to bet. There has always been something oddly charming about the place. I think it's its grittiness; its New England toughness. It's the type of place where you can go, bet the horses, drink a few beers, call a jockey a bum and a thief and have a great time. Suffolk Downs might just be the least pretentious racetrack in the country. I like that.

Actually, I'm not being entirely fair. The place is a lot more than that. There's a rich history there. Seabiscuit ran at Suffolk and so did Whirlaway and Stymie. It's where local hero Waquoit outgamed Broad Brush to the wire in the 1987 MassCap, with track announcer Jim Hannon screeching wildly like the excited fan that he was. It's where racing has existed, albeit with some interruptions, since 1935.

Back in that era, there used to be a bunch of tracks in New England. Suffolk is the last one standing. That means that its demise would not just wipe out one track with a rich history but an entire industry in an important region of the country. Does anyone really want that to happen?

The extinction of Suffolk Downs surely wasn't Patrick's intention when he announced earlier this week that he wanted the state to begin soliciting bids for three casino licenses in the state. The ominous part of his announcement was that he made no mention of Suffolk, the Plainridge harness track or any of the state's dog tracks. According to sources, Massachusetts's politicians are, by and large, no fans of the greyhound tracks or their owners, and that's the reason why Patrick isn't pushing for casinos at the state's racetracks.

Despite Patrick's apparent disinterest in having slots at the tracks, Suffolk management quickly threw its hat in the ring, letting it be known that it would be more than glad to have one of those precious slots licenses.

"Because of its location just outside Boston, because of the history of the place, because there are plenty of people who have fond memories of this track, there are indeed people rooting for us and saying, 'Those people deserve a chance,'" said Suffolk COO Chip Tuttle. "If the Governor was going to propose three casinos the way he has, we thought we would try the best we could to make sure one is here. We are trying to position Suffolk Downs as the location for the Boston area casino."

Having said what they needed to say, Suffolk Downs management will now keep its finger crossed and hope that this turns out in their favor. The stakes are immensely high.

Management says that with or without slots, racing has a bright future at Suffolk Downs and that every intention is to make the track grow and prosper. Thus far, Richard Fields, a casino developer who purchased the track earlier this year, has backed up his words. Fields brought back the MassCap, which hadn't been run since 2004 and has put some needed improvements into the plant.

"If we're passed over (for slots), the ownership is committed to racing for the long haul," Tuttle said. "They've made it clear that this is not a short-term investment. They want to see this facility thrive. Regardless of what happens, we're going to keep going."

Tuttle is either guilty of wishful thinking or he's saying what he thinks the politicians want to hear. How can Suffolk Downs possibly survive without slot machines?

It's a sad reality that the sport can no longer stand on its own two feet at most racetracks. A second or third-tier track like Suffolk that doesn't have slots can't offer quality racing. Without quality racing, it can't offer the type of product people will bet on. With no one betting on the product, things only will get worse. Massachusetts doesn't even have an OTB system to funnel money into the tracks.

Without slots, it won't take someone long to figure out that the racing business is a losing business and that this big chunk of land just outside Boston can make that someone a lot of money if it is developed.

That should never happen, not to any racetrack, particularly one that has this kind of history and importance. Now, it's all up to the politicians of Massachusetts to do the right thing.

Bill Finley is an award-winning racing writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times, USA Today and Sports Illustrated. Contact Bill at wnfinley@aol.com.