

# The Boston Globe

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2007

## The great Masscap revival

**W**HAT IS TRUE in the realm of arts and letters is also true for the sport of kings. The pleasures of the museumgoer, the reader, and the *turfiste* are, each in its own way, suffused with memories of achievement. Just as new young authors and painters may be compared to a Tolstoy or a Cezanne, so the latest winner of the Kentucky Derby is judged by aficionados against recollections of a Citation or a Secretariat.

Which is why this afternoon's revival of the Masscap at Suffolk Downs, after an absence of two years, means so much to New England racing fans: It restores what had been a severed connection between a tenuous present and a luminous past.

Back in 1937, in the slough of Depression, the third running of the Massachusetts Handicap was won by a bow-legged castoff from one of the Eastern establishment's blue-blood stables, an equine hero of the masses called Seabiscuit. With his star-crossed jockey, Red Pollard, in the irons, the comeback colt set a new track record of 1 minute 49 seconds for a mile and an eighth. Two years later, on the cusp of World War II, Triple Crown laureate Whirlaway won the Masscap with the peerless Eddie Arcaro in the saddle.

In later years, the scroll of Masscap victors

would include Stymie, who was claimed for \$1,500 by the onetime trainer of homing pigeons, Hirsch Jacobs, and went on to earn nearly \$1 million — in the postwar years, when purses were but a fraction of what they are today. Other luminaries of the turf to take the Masscap included Pavot, Crimson Satan, Secretariat's Derby-winning stablemate, Riva Ridge, and the beloved local horse Waquoit. Then in 1995 and 1996, New Englanders had the memorable experience of seeing Cigar, perhaps the classiest horse of the past quarter-century, win consecutive runnings of the Masscap.

It is unlikely that the field going to the post at the East Boston oval today includes another Seabiscuit or Cigar — though the logical favorite, Fairbanks, has finished within a few lengths of some of the best horses in the country. Nevertheless, the Masscap's return betokens something more than simply one festive Saturday at Suffolk Downs.

For local racing enthusiasts, who may spend a few days each summer at Saratoga and who relish seeing simulcasts of the Triple Crown classics in the spring or the Breeders' Cup races later in the fall, the revived Masscap means that past traditions are being preserved, and there can be a future for their sport here in New England.