

# SARATOGA RACEWAY: THE HORSES ARE AT THE GATE

by Paul Post



Following on the heels of Funny Cide and the acclaimed motion picture "Seabiscuit," it didn't seem possible that the 2004 Saratoga Race Course season could be any better than last year's.

Then came a horse called Smarty Jones, which captured the country's imagination in his bid for a Triple Crown, only to be outdone by Birdstone, owned by none other than Saratoga Springs socialite Mary Lou Whitney.

Regardless of whether there's a rematch at Saratoga, the Racing City will be abuzz with excitement when the 136th annual meet kicks off on Wednesday, July 28. The 36-day gathering of the world's best horses, jockeys, trainers and owners runs through Labor Day Monday, Sept. 6.

*"The racing gods have been very kind to us,"* said Bill Nader, vice president for communications with the New York Racing Association. *"The excitement surrounding Smarty Jones was phenomenal. People everywhere followed his story. That momentum will continue*

*right through Saratoga's season."*

It's possible that the Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner could meet Birdstone again in the \$1 million Travers Stakes slated for Saturday, Aug. 28. Smarty Jones narrowly missed becoming the first Triple Crown winner since 1978 when Birdstone charged past him down the Belmont stretch.

The Travers has a rich and colorful history and a rematch between Smarty Jones and Birdstone would only add to it. In 1978, Triple Crown winner Affirmed squared off against arch-rival Alydar. After crossing the finish line first, Affirmed was disqualified for interference and Alydar rode to the winner's circle, helping perpetuate Saratoga's well-deserved reputation as a *"graveyard of champions."*

One hundred years from now, people might very well look back on the early 21st century as one of the golden eras in the track's long and storied past. Attendance has topped the 1 million mark two of the past three years, and a new daily average record of 29,147 was set in 2003. In addition, a new single-day mark of 71,337 was set last August 17, besting the mark of 69,523 set on August 4, 2002.

The single day on-track handle of \$9,390,934 last Travers Day was also a record, topping the \$8,642,160 wagered on Travers Day 1991. Horses are obviously the main attraction, but Saratoga's ambience and atmosphere are a major drawing card,

# ALL - AMERICAN SPORTS now offers our teams **DISCOUNT UNIFORMS**

---

through our proud sponsor

*Smith*  
**INDUSTRIES**

18 Hudson St.  
Mechanicville, NY 12118

---

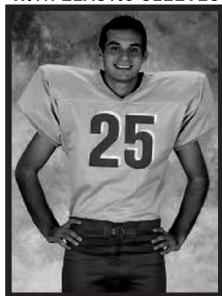
**ALL TEAMS RECEIVE A 10% DISCOUNT**

**Just for being an ALL - AMERICAN SPORTS TEAM**

**CALL THEM AT: 1-800-223-7367**

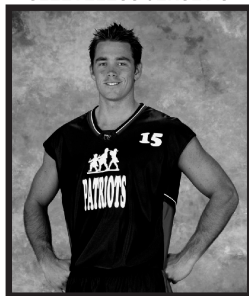
**OR EMAIL AT [INFO@SMITH-INDUSTRIES.COM](mailto:INFO@SMITH-INDUSTRIES.COM)**

TRADITIONAL JERSEY'S  
WITH ELASTIC SLEEVES



STARTING AT \$21.00

SUPER TOUGH  
SLEEVELESS JERSEY'S



STARTING AT \$25.00

CUSTOMIZED  
FOOTBALL EQUIPMENT



ALWAYS THE LOWEST  
PRICES!



too. Men chomping stogies and women dressed to the hilt in broad hats and colorful dresses make this venue one of

the nation's best for people watching. No wonder Sports Illustrated has rated Saratoga Race Course as one of the Top 10 sports destinations in America.

The festive atmosphere is highlighted by a musical menu that ranges from rock bands to Dixieland jazz. In some respects, the track is a microcosm of society at large with America's most wealthy elite gracing its clubhouse, while backstretch workers such as grooms and hot-walkers work hard to keep horses in tip-top shape.

Formal tours provide an excellent behind-the-scenes look at every day track life. Sometimes, it's best to soak up the aura by simply moseying from one location to another, seeing how people from different walks of life all contribute to this unique racing facility.

Early risers like to start their day with a trackside breakfast, when horses breeze past on training runs in the cool, morning mist. The more than century-old clubhouse is filled with ghosts of years past who have witnessed some of the greatest races ever assembled.

Before each race, throngs flock to the paddock rail to get a closer glimpse of these amazing equine athletes.

Another favorite way to enjoy the

race course is by turning out for give-away days, when "spinnners" cycle through turnstiles for free gifts such as bobblehead dolls, caps, T-shirts, clocks and umbrellas.

One of Saratoga's most familiar sounds is that of track announcer Tom Durkin, whose voice signals the start of another year, "*And they're off at Saratoga.*"

This year, perhaps more than ever, sports personalities of all kinds will descend on Saratoga to get a glimpse of Smarty Jones. Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, NFL Hall of Famer Sam Huff and Louisville basketball coach Rick Pitino are among those who visit the track frequently.


"*I come up here every year,*" said Jim Kaat, a Yankees broadcaster and former major league pitcher. "*I think it's the greatest. I wish I could be here longer. After I retire I'd like to come up here on a regular basis.*"

Hall of Fame horse trainer D. Wayne Lukas has been to every major race in the country. "*The family atmosphere and the whole aura that surrounds this place is not able to be duplicated by any other track,*" he said.

ESPN sports analyst Kenny Mayne was at the 2001 Travers.

"*This is one of my favorite places on earth,*" he said. "*It's authentic. It sort of feels like you've gone back to the 1930s. If I could, I'd come up here for the entire meet.*"

**For information about 2004 Saratoga Race Course special events and stakes races visit the Web site: [www.nyra.com/saratoga](http://www.nyra.com/saratoga).**



**SMACK  
DOWN!**

Thursday 8PM



STAR TREK  
**ENTERPRISE**

Wednesday 8PM



[www.wnyatv.com](http://www.wnyatv.com)