

SARATOGA - THE MECCA OF HORSE RACING

by Paul Post



COMING AROUND THE BEND IN THE WHITNEY HANDICAP IN SARATOGA

Saratoga Race Course takes front and center stage each summer when many of the best thoroughbred horses in the world gather for the track's 36-day meet.

This year, thanks to the introduction of new video slot machines, there's renewed interest in harness racing at the flat track's next door neighbor, **Saratoga Gaming and Raceway**.

Fueled by increased revenues, purses have already gone up dramatically, improving racing quality while luring many new people into the business.

"Every state they've put this in, it's been tremendous," said driver-trainer Scott Mongeon, who has a 17-horse stable at the harness track. "I've already got back owners who left the business years ago."

Fans can enjoy live harness racing from Wednesday to Saturday (post time 7:10 PM) through June 8. The schedule expands

to include live racing on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday from June 8 through Labor Day.

Track reconstruction and additions have cost an estimated \$15 million, which includes more than 1,300 video gaming machines, along with a new food court and bar area.

Revenues from gaming machines are expected to triple or quadruple purses, the money that horse people get for winning. This, in turn, has encouraged many horse people to expand operations.

"THEY STRUGGLED BEFORE... NOW HORSES WILL BE ABLE TO RACE IN THEIR OWN CLASS"

More than 900 horses are stabled at the raceway now, compared to half that number a year ago.

"It'll make for better racing," Horseman Brian Cross said.

"They struggled before to get races together [and] had to mix and match. Now horses will be able to race in their own class."

Plans call for shutting the oval down this fall and expanding it from a half-mile

to a 5/8-mile facility to make races more competitive.

At some point this summer, owners Skip and Wendy Spring hope to showcase their horse, Bunny Lake, at Saratoga. Three years ago, following her 3-year-old campaign, she was named National Harness Horse of the Year.

Bunny Lake spends most of her time racing at larger tracks such as The Meadowlands, where purses are highest, but the Springs would like to give local fans a chance to see her compete, too. Wendy Spring said she's thrilled by Saratoga's improvements.

"You're going to see better stables and more horses shipping in," she said. "We'll be going to the track a lot more, even when we're not racing."

From late July through Labor Day Weekend, the flat track attracts top horses, jockeys, owners and trainers from around the globe. In 2003, the 135th meet closed with a new all-time paid admission record of nearly 1.05 million people, eclipsing the previous figure of just over a million set in 2001. Average daily paid admission also hit a new high of more than 29,000 attendees.

Last year's thoroughbred season was one of the most exciting in recent years thanks to the exploits of locally-owned and bred Funny Cide, which captured the 2003 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes. The debut of the movie Seabiscuit, parts of which were filmed in Saratoga Springs, also heightened enthusiasm for the sport.

Aside from each day's races, there are numerous other track related activities to keep fans occupied. The National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame hosts inductions of the sport's greatest jockeys, horses, trainers and owners each year.

Likewise, the annual Fasig-Tipton Sales command plenty of attention. Last summer, more than a dozen horses sold for at least \$1 million, with the highest bid reaching more than \$2 million.

The Travers, known as The Mid-Summer Derby, is the highlight of Saratoga's meet. The entire city comes alive with the weeklong Travers Festival with a party atmosphere in recognition of one of the most anticipated dates of the racing calendar.

The Travers isn't the only Grade I stakes race garnering international attention. The Jim Dandy Stakes and Whitney Stakes follow close behind.

Thanks to harness racing's newfound success and thoroughbred racing's prominent position, Saratoga is perhaps more than ever ***"The Summer Place to Be."***



VIDEO GAMING AT THE SARATOGA RACINO.