

Title:

Grand Old Saratoga Opens 36-Day Meeting on July 26

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Summary:

Saratoga Springs has been attracting travelers even before the American Revolution when wealthy pilgrims journeyed to the carbonated mineral springs running through the area.

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Article Body:

Saratoga Springs has been attracting travelers even before the American Revolution when wealthy pilgrims journeyed to the carbonated mineral springs running through the area.

It's where decisive battles were fought during the American Revolution and Civil War. The 1777 Battle of Saratoga, considered the first Colonial victory and a turning point in the Revolutionary War, ended with General John Burgoyne surrendering his British troops.

During the Civil War, America's oldest thoroughbred racetrack opened on Aug. 26, 1863. The Saratoga Racing Association bought 71 acres to other land already set for racing. On Aug. 1, 1864, a new course was established in almost the same spot as today's Saratoga.

New York Racing Association (NYRA) officials have announced across-the-board purse increases for the 36-day meeting than opens July 26. All classes of races will receive increases, said Bill Nader, NYRA senior vice president.

"There are a lot of changes on this schedule, including some purse reductions or eliminations of stakes, but we made sure that NYRA's commitment to excellence remains intact," he said. "The overall dollar reduction in stakes is nearly \$4 million, but much of that money will be added back in overnight stakes.

"This helps NYRA strike a better balance with dollars allocated to stakes and overnight races, and be more responsive to the available horse inventory from

meet to meet.

While the NYRA usually boosts purses each year at Saratoga, Nader said, this year "the increases are much more robust."

Overnight stakes will carry purses of \$70,000, a hike of \$5,000. New York-bred races will see sizable increases compared with the current Belmont meeting. Maiden special weight races will jump \$6,000 to \$47,000 while purses in first-level allowance contests will skyrocket \$9,000 to \$50,000.

The NYRA will also continue to raise the purse of any race with at least eight horses that's moved off the turf by 20 percent in hopes of deterring scratches, a policy launched this year at Belmont.

The prestigious \$500,000 Woodward for 3-year-olds and up at 1 1/8 miles was moved to Saratoga on Sept. 2 to spread out the more important handicap races. The Saratoga Breeders' Cup Handicap was eliminated to make room for one of the 15 Grade 1 events included in the array of 47 stakes.

There's at least one stakes on every live racing program and two on eight days during the meeting that ends Sept. 4.

For handicap horses, the summer/fall schedule from Saratoga through Belmont Park's meeting, including the 52nd Woodward, features the \$750,000 Whitney at 1 1/8 miles on Aug. 5 at Saratoga and the \$750,000 Jockey Gold Cup at 1 1/4 miles on Oct. 7 at Belmont.

"We placed four Grade 1 stakes on Labor Day Weekend," Nader pointed out. "We also brought back the full compliment of two-year-old stakes to give the younger stars of our sport every opportunity to succeed."

Highlight of the meeting is the 137th Travers, oldest American stakes race named for the founder of Saratoga. The \$1 million contest at 1 1/4 miles honoring William R. Travers will feature the outstanding sophomores of '06 and help decide top 3-year-old honors.

Expected to show up on Aug. 26 at the historic track 180 miles north of New York City are:

Bernardini, winner of the Preakness; Jazil, who captured the Belmont; Bluegrass Cat, runner-up in the Kentucky Derby behind injured Barbaro and second in the Belmont; Steppenwolfer, third at Churchill Downs and fourth in the Belmont; and Sunriver, third in the Belmont.

Kentucky, owned by Travers, won the inaugural running in 1864 when the purse was only \$2,940. The fastest time was posted by General Assembly in 1979: two minutes flat.

The largest margin of victory was recorded in '67 by Damascus: 22 lengths. Seven times a nose separated the top two finishers.

By Greg Melikov

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