



LQHBA Insider - By Martha Claussen

January 4, 2017

LOUISIANA DOWNS GETS THE RACING YEAR STARTED

The New Year brings the first Quarter Horse meet of 2017 when Harrah's Louisiana Downs kicks off their live season on Saturday, January 7. The track, located in Bossier City, will conduct a 46-day meet, with racing set for Saturday through Tuesday at 1:00 pm.

Outstanding Meet on Tap

David Heitzmann, Louisiana Downs racing secretary, has seen an increase in stall applications and confirmed that several new horsemen will run in the upcoming meet. The list includes 2016 leading AQHA conditioner Judd Kearn, John Stinebaugh, Brian Stroud and former jockey Saul Ramirez, Jr., who transitioned to a training career last year.

Julien "Butch" Stevens was the meet's leading owner in 2016 and looks forward to running this year.

"I'm a breeder, so the meet gives you a chance to win some races with your claiming or lower level allowance horses," he said.

Stevens points out that there will be added money due to increased Video Poker Fund allotment to Louisiana Downs. Also, with several new outfits running, that full fields will be attractive to racing fans.

"I think it will be a good meet," adds Stevens. "Plus, Louisiana Downs has a good track surface, which is important for older horses and training 2-year-olds."

Kenneth Weeks was the top trainer last season and will be joined by noted conditioners including Trey Ellis, Kenny Roberts, Carlos Saldivar, Kevin Broussard, Willie Simien and Evangeline Downs leading trainer, Orlando Orozco.

Eddi Emanuel Martinez won 30 races in the 2016 Louisiana Downs Quarter Horse racing season to clinch the rider title. He will be joined by David Alvarez, Alfonso Lujan, Antonio Alberto, Donald Watson and John Hamilton, who missed last year's meet while he recovered from shoulder surgery. It should be a very competitive jockey colony!

Mardi Gras Futurity Tops the Stakes Schedule

Twelve stakes* are set for the 2017 Louisiana Downs Quarter Horse meet, beginning with the 250-yard Harrah's Dash and Marathon Stakes, at 870-yards on opening day. The richest events of the season fall on Saturday, March 18 with the \$250,000-guaranteed Mardi Gras Futurity (RG2) and the \$100,000-estimated Mardi Gras Derby.

Last year, 116 accredited Louisiana-bred Quarter Horses competed in 12 trials for the Mardi Gras Futurity.

"We appreciate the efforts of Trent McIntosh and the racing office at Louisiana Downs for their support of 2-year-old racing," said Tony Patterson, executive director of the Louisiana Quarter Horse Breeders Association. "Their willingness to conduct schooling races is essential and greatly appreciated by horsemen who have paid into the Mardi Gras and Harrah's Entertainment Futurities."

Both the winners of the Mardi Gras and Harrah's Entertainment made a notable impact in 2016.

Rdd Lajollanfastdash, bred by Richard Dale Domingue, won the \$273,054 Mardi Gras Futurity (RG2). The son of Heza Fast Dash racing for Miguel A. Aguilar, was the fastest qualifier in trials and took the final under Raul Ramirez, Jr. The gray qualified to four futurities, adding a victory in the \$323,488 LQHBA Sale Futurity (G1) at Fair Grounds and finishing third in the \$1 million LQHBA Breeders Futurity at Evangeline Downs. His final tally was six wins from eight starts as he banked \$403,498.

Kristen Paredes' Duponte, broke his maiden at odds of 16-1 in the 300-yard, \$267,700 Harrah's Entertainment Futurity (G3) in March. The son of American Runaway, bred by AQHA champion breeder Bobby D. Cox, followed that up with a huge score in the \$1 million Heritage Place Futurity (G1) at Remington Park. He was then shipped to Ruidoso Downs to compete in trials for the \$3 million All American Futurity (G1) in August. Duponte finished his year with three wins from eight starts and earnings of \$647,034.

Announcer Peter Berry Takes the Microphone

There will be a new voice in the announcer booth this season at Louisiana Downs. Peter Berry, with his melodic Australian accent, will call the races in 2017. Probably best known for his tenure at Mountaineer Park in West Virginia, Berry will be spending the first three months of the year in Bossier City.

Berry had his start in the racing industry in 1974 as a journalist, specializing in horse racing in Melbourne, Australia. For close to 20 years, he has called races at United States tracks including Arapahoe Park, Buffalo Raceway and SunRay Park. He has been the voice of Mountaineer since 2004, and will return there when the Louisiana Downs meet wraps in March.

While Thoroughbreds have been his mainstay, Berry has called Quarter Horse races at Arapahoe and SunRay, and even took over the microphone for his good friend, Michael Wrona at Lone Star Park one night during the 2003 Quarter Horse meet. He is looking forward to getting to know the horsemen and jockeys at Louisiana Downs, and will be seeking help from the racing office staff regarding Cajun pronunciations.

"I will arrive a few days before the meet begins and hope to get up to speed quickly," said Berry. "There may be one or two mess-ups with names in the beginning, but I am looking forward to a great live racing season."

Better Luck with Mother Nature

All systems are go for opening day on Saturday, January 7, and everyone is hoping for good weather throughout the meet, which concludes on March 22. Last year, Louisiana racing was on the ropes when the Shreveport area flooded. On Thursday, March 10, Louisiana Downs officials ordered an evacuation of the track's backside, urging all horses to be out by 10 am the next morning.

Obviously, the urgency of the situation was stressful for horsemen and backside workers, but everyone helped each other and the entire stable area was successfully evacuated.

"I called owners, friends and everybody I could think of to come help," explained top Louisiana conditioner, Kenny Roberts. "The support was amazing; I didn't think we could get all the horses out, but we did!"

Order was restored and the rescheduled Mardi Gras Futurity took place a week later!

So, full steam ahead for the first meet of 2017. With added money for purses, full and competitive fields and a new voice in the announcer booth, there is a lot to look forward to. Hopefully, Mother Nature will give the area a break this year, but if she invokes havoc, one thing's for sure: the racing community at Louisiana Downs will withstand her challenge with their usual fighting spirit! Good luck to all involved!

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The LQHBA Insider is a monthly feature written by Martha Claussen for www.lqhba.com. She served as publicity director at Sam Houston Race Park for ten years. She continues to be active in writing, fan education and Quarter Horse racing publicity in Texas, Louisiana and other regions in North America.