

# Belmont Park Spring Meet Looks Better than Ever

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Benoit & Associates

Beholder is expected to ship in for the \$1 million Ogden Phipps, where she could face Close Hatches and Princess of Sylmar.

ELMONT, N.Y. ó Former Southern California-based racing executive Martin Panza survived his first winter in New York. Oh, yeah, and the weather was tough, too.

After a difficult Aqueduct winter/spring meet in terms of quality and quantity, Panza hopes for bigger and better things when Belmont Park opens Thursday for its 54-day spring/summer meet, which runs through July 13.

õBigger is betterö certainly will be a theme for the meet, highlighted by a beefed-up Belmont Stakes Day program June 7. Already the highlight of any Belmont Park spring/summer meet, Belmont Stakes Day will be must-see viewing, with 10 stakes totaling \$7.7 million and a total of 13 races worth \$8 million, making it the second-richest day on the North America racing calendar behind only BreedersøCup Saturday.

In addition to the Belmont Stakes, which got a purse enhancement to \$1.5 million, the card will include the \$1.25 million Metropolitan Handicap and the \$1 million Ogden Phipps, a race that is expected to draw Beholder, Princess of Sylmar, and Close Hatches, the stars of last yearø 3-year-old filly division who have already combined to go 4 for 4 this year. The June 7 card also features the \$1 million Manhattan, \$750,000 Acorn, \$750,000 Just a Game, \$500,000 Brooklyn Invitational, and \$500,000 Woody Stephens.

On July 5, as part of a program featuring five stakes worth \$3.35 million, Panza has created Stars and Stripes Day, featuring the \$1.25 million Belmont Derby and \$1 million Belmont Oaks, for 3-

year-old males and females, respectively, on turf. Those races are offered as Grade 1 events since they are basically the Jamaica and Garden City, typically run in the fall under different names.

Panza is hoping to draw international interest for those races and said initial response has been positive from abroad.

“A lot of people from Europe have said, ‘Give us details. What’s going on?’” Panza said. “We’ve had good response from Japan. The races are going to be fantastic. I’ve done it before. I know it works.”

There will be big cards offered May 11 (Mother’s Day), a program featuring four stakes anchored by the Grade 1, \$400,000 Man o’ War and including the Grade 2, \$250,000 Ruffian.

In total, there will be 62 stakes offered at Belmont worth \$17.95 million in purses.

Some fans will have to pay a little more to attend a day of racing at Belmont Park. Admission to both the clubhouse and grandstand is \$5 ó grandstand admission had been \$4 ó and preferred parking and valet parking are now \$3 and \$7.

NYRA president and chief executive Chris Kay created a stir when at an earlier board meeting he mentioned that the grandstand would be closed at Belmont. In reality, only certain sections ó beyond the sixteenth pole ó on the second, third, and fourth floors ó will be off limits on all days except Belmont Day.

In keeping with the “bigger is better” theme, the picnic area has been expanded to include two additional areas, and the Widener turf course has been widened by a lane to allow the racing office to card more runners.

The purse structure is similar to last year, though Panza has made sprint races the same as distance races. Under the previous regime, sprint races were worth \$5,000 less.

Panza has made adjustments to the condition books, cutting out some of the cheaper races, at least for New York-breds. For example, the lowest level for New York-bred maiden claimers is \$40,000, whereas in the past, it was \$16,000. The bottom open-company maiden-claiming level is \$20,000.

Though Panza was hoping to attract new outfits for the Belmont meet, it appears that only a few names ó Tony Dutrow, Ken McPeck, Dallas Stewart, and Steve Klesaris ó are additions to the backstretch.

The jockey colony will be deep, as regulars Javier Castellano, John Velazquez, Joel Rosario, Jose Lezcano, and Luis Saez return to give the brothers Ortiz, Irad and Jose, competition. Joe Bravo and Taylor Rice, the leading apprentice at Aqueduct, will join the fray.

Bravo, a mainstay at Monmouth for years, said the three-day race week at the Jersey Shore track isn't to his satisfaction. Bravo, who was scheduled to ride Danza in the Kentucky Derby, will be represented by agent Matt Muzikar.

"Matt worked for me years ago when I got my 3,000th winner," said Bravo, who at 4,933 wins is closing in on 5,000. "Getting to team up with an agent who already did it for me is great. New York has the top racing in the country; it feels like it's going to be better than ever."

Rice said she is looking forward to riding with the best riders in the country. She has apprentice status into September.