

Racing officials expect Saratoga attendance, on-track handle to be up without NYC Off-Track Betting

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Skip Dickstein/Times Union

Saratoga Race Course, which opens Friday, will have 52 stakes race, including 17 Grade I races through Sept. 5.

[Saratoga](#) brings out the best in horse racing.

Those hoping to get in on the action this summer will have to head to the racetrack near the [Adirondacks](#) because for the first time since 1970, there is no [New York City Off-Track Betting](#).

The NYCOTB closed its doors last December, and since then attendance at Aqueduct and [Belmont](#) has increased 50%.

While there won't be a 50% increase at Saratoga, [Charlie Hayward](#), the president and chief executive officer of the [New York Racing Association](#), which operates Aqueduct, Belmont and Saratoga, is confident attendance will be up.

"I think we're going to have a very good year particularly on track," [Hayward](#) said of Saratoga, which opens on Friday. "I think it's hard to believe, but I think you're going to have people who haven't been to Saratoga in a while that are here in the city because there is no OTB, even though it's 200 miles away. I think we're going to have an increase in on-track attendance."

An increase in attendance should also help NYRA's bottom line, as a dollar bet on track is worth roughly four times as much as a \$1 bet off-track. For example, if someone bets \$100 at the track on a NYRA race, NYRA retains slightly more than \$10. If that same bet was made at the now-defunct NYCOTB, NYRA would receive only \$2.50. At the still-operational [Capital OTB](#) in [Albany](#), NYRA would receive just \$1.25 on that same bet.

Last year, the daily average all-source handle on the races from Saratoga reached \$13 million, a figure most racetracks can only imagine. All-source handle includes every race bet - including at other tracks - at Saratoga.

"In attendance and on-track handle I think we're going to be up," Hayward said. "All-source handle we've been running better than the industry."

Since the financial markets nearly collapsed in September of 2008, the racing industry has seen a steady decline in handle, off 8% from last year, but Saratoga held its own in 2010, down just 1.7%.

"I'd be happy with a 2-3% decline in all-source handle given what's going on in the industry," Hayward said. "It's going to be interesting to see."

Saratoga will offer 52 stakes races, including 17 Grade I's worth \$6.65 million and races through Sept. 5, with no racing on Tuesdays.

The first Saratoga meet opened in 1863 with just four days of racing, but over time has been lengthened to four weeks, then five, then six and now boasts 40 days of racing, six days a week.

The increase in dates has resulted in a more watered-down product, but Saratoga is still the summer place to be for horsemen.

"It's everybody's focal meet," trainer [Todd Pletcher](#) said. "It's NYRA's focal meet. People get up for it, show a little more competitiveness there and want to win there more than anywhere else."

Pletcher should know, having won the training title at the Spa seven times, including last year when he saddled a record 36 winners, breaking his own mark of 35 set in 2003 and 2004.

"I think you can make an argument the quality of racing in some areas isn't the same as what it was when it was a four-week meet," the trainer said. "At the same time, the six-

plus weeks is still a very successful venture for everyone. The crowds are bigger than they would be here on corresponding days and the enthusiasm level is higher, so I still think it's good."

Unlike Aqueduct and Belmont, where racing is run for the majority of the year, Saratoga is more appreciated.

"The fact that so many more owners are there on a consistent basis and everybody wants to show up there and win there," Pletcher said. "Churchill is over, so you get an influx of [Kentucky](#) horses, and better horses from around the country, so it has more of a national flavor than a local meet."

Despite the horse population being at its lowest level in years, NYRA once again received a record number of applications, allowing it to run six days a week at the Spa, where most tracks have cut down their live racing dates.

"The horse population has had an impact throughout the country on field sizes and quality," Hayward said. "Look at Aqueduct last winter. We had the worst racing we've ever had. Why was that? That was horse population. We had 15-16 hundred horses at Aqueduct and Belmont rather than 21-22 hundred. [California](#) has gone from five to four days. Churchill's from five to four days. [Del Mar](#) from six to five days. We can run six days at Saratoga because people are here and want to participate. The barns are full."

One horse that won't show up at Saratoga is [Kentucky Derby](#) winner Animal Kingdom, who was injured in the [Belmont Stakes](#) and won't race again until next year.

Uncle Mo, the favorite for the Derby before being scratched the day before the race because of liver disease, may return to the races at Saratoga on Aug. 27, but not in the prestigious [Travers Stakes](#). Instead the colt may run in the King's Bishop Stakes on the undercard.

Despite no Mo, the \$1 million Travers could still attract [Preakness](#) winner Shackleford, Belmont Stakes winner Ruler On Ice, and many other 3-year-olds because the division is still wide open.