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Bay Watch

BY JIM FREER

Tampa Bay Downs picks up the pace of Florida racing

“Once you come to Tampa Bay Downs, we expect you will return,” said Stella F. Thayer, president and treasurer of the Oldsmar, Fla., track.

Horsemen and fans have been doing that this decade, in person and through a big increase in off-site wagering, as Tampa Bay Downs has improved its racing program while keeping the look and feel of a traditional racetrack.

“We have always focused on presenting good-quality racing and on maintaining our standards of integrity,” Thayer said. She and her brother Howell Ferguson, the track’s vice president and secretary, have owned Tampa Bay Downs since 1986.

“We have upgraded the program every year, and we are optimistic about this year,” Thayer said of the racing season that begins Dec. 13.

The 2008-2009 meet will run through May 3, with 94 live racing days. It will be the 83rd season for the track that is located near the northeast corner of Tampa Bay.

Track officials expect total purses will be about \$16 million, compared with its record \$15.7 million in 2007-2008.

The highlight will be the annual March 14 Festival day, which features the \$300,000 Tampa Bay Derby (gr. III) at 1¹/₁₆ miles for 3-year-olds. The race is one of five graded stakes, all grade III, at Tampa Bay Downs.

Recent Tampa Bay Derbys have attracted leading contenders on the trail for the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (gr. I).

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Leading Florida Sires by Earnings

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JOSEPH V. DIORIO PHOTOS

Racing at Tampa Bay Downs gets under way Dec. 13

2009 Stallion Roster

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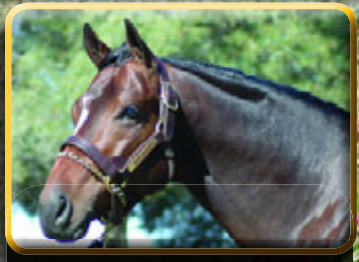


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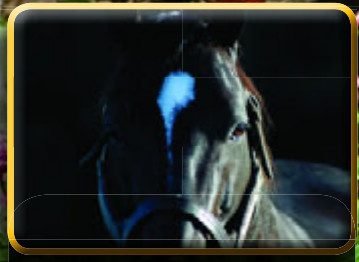
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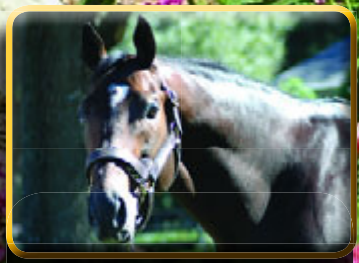
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Storm Cat - Extravagant Woman

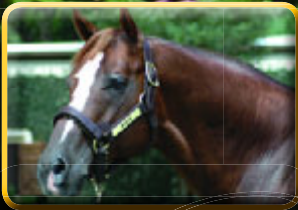


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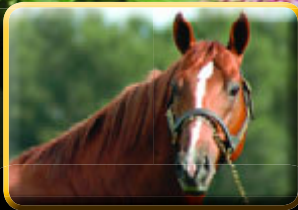


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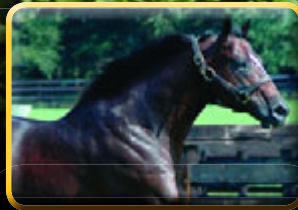
Standing Four of the Top Freshman Sires in Florida



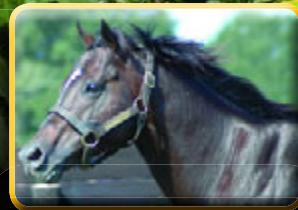
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#2 freshman sire
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Storm Cat - Mariah's Storm
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Elusive Quality - Tin Oaks
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CITY PLACE
Storm Cat - Glitter Woman
Storm Cat's #1 freshman
sire of SHs (tied)

Hartley/DeRenzo
Leading the way...

Photos by Serita Hull and Joy Gilbert

2008 Leading Sires in Florida

State sire lists updated daily online.
Go to <http://breeding.bloodhorse.com/sirelists.asp>

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in Florida (exported stallions are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available statistics for the Northern Hemisphere through November 26, 2008. As supplied to The Blood-Horse by The Jockey Club Information Systems Inc., earnings exclude monies from Japan and Hong Kong. *Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners includes all countries. (A ♯ indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).

Rank	Stallion (Foaling Year, Sire), Farm Standing	2009 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	Stakes Wnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2008 Earnings	Cumulative			
								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	MONTBROOK (90, Buckaroo), Ocala Stud Farm	\$10,000	162/91	4/7	1/4	(Big Drama, \$410,250)	\$3,776,948	627	40	1.56	1.63
2	ALPHABET SOUP (91, Cozzene), Adena Springs South	\$7,500	165/76	4/5	3/4	(Moujane, \$188,778)	\$2,929,960	*573	35	1.45	1.47
3	MILWAUKEE BREW (97, Wild Again), Adena Springs South	\$7,500	99/53	4/7	2/4	(Ginger Brew, \$729,006)	\$2,771,302	156	4	1.40	1.59
4	GRAEME HALL (97, Dehere), Winding Oaks Farm	\$5,000	107/69	7/11	2/7	(Graeme Six, \$194,593)	\$2,766,172	*187	9	1.57	1.56
5	PUT IT BACK (98, Honour and Glory), Bridlewood Farm	\$8,500	122/72	6/15	0/6	(In Summation, \$365,340)	\$2,703,472	*279	12	1.76	1.37
6	DOUBLE HONOR (95, Gone West), Get Away Farm	\$3,500	131/76	2/3	0/2	(All Night Labor, \$186,916)	\$2,571,440	398	16	1.25	1.32
7	HALO'S IMAGE (91, Halo), Bridlewood Farm	\$5,000	146/69	2/2	1/2	(Halo Najib, \$231,577)	\$2,567,410	*432	17	1.36	1.39
8	RED BULLET (97, Unbridled), Adena Springs South	\$7,500	68/42	3/5	0/3	(Fatal Bullet, \$718,286)	\$2,461,073	139	4	1.58	1.97
9	CONCERTO (94, Chief's Crown), Ocala Stud Farm	\$5,000	106/62	1/3	1/1	(Finallymadeit, \$222,415)	\$2,392,268	296	18	1.62	1.34
10	THREE WONDERS (97, Storm Cat), Hidden Point Farm	Died, 2008	127/69	2/2	2/2	(Acai, \$340,541)	\$2,275,998	196	3	1.15	1.20
11	STRAIGHT MAN (96, Saint Ballado), Signature Stallions	\$6,000	121/61	6/7	3/6	(Get Funky, \$126,819)	\$2,171,907	282	8	1.05	1.21
12	CONCORDE'S TUNE (89, Concorde Bound), Ocala Stud Farm	\$3,000	109/61	3/3	0/3	(Silver Moose, \$102,460)	\$2,093,468	374	21	1.29	1.11
13	SWEETSOUTHERNSAINT (95, Saint Ballado), Ocala Stud Farm	\$2,500	95/43	4/7	0/4	(Dulce Realidad, \$221,300)	\$2,035,949	241	9	1.46	1.08
14	NOTEBOOK (85, Well Decorated)	Died, 2003	64/39	1/1	0/1	(Diamond Stripes, \$680,000)	\$1,721,922	617	49	1.75	1.47
15	D'WILDCAT (98, Forest Wildcat), Vinery	\$6,500	45/27	2/3	1/2	(Authenticat, \$337,644)	\$1,595,634	68	3	1.85	1.50

*A-E and COMPARABLE INDEX: The lifetime Average-Earnings Index indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned, on the average, in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00. The Comparable Index indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AEI higher than their mares Comparable Index.

The most notable was James B. Tafel's Street Sense, who in 2007 won the Derby in Oldsmar and seven weeks later won the Derby in Louisville.

Tampa Bay Downs' program for 3-year olds and recent years' addition of several other multiple-stakes Saturdays are among the reasons it has gained more attention from horsemen and bettors, including simulcast, said Allison De Luca, the track's director of racing and racing secretary.

Tampa Bay Downs' turf course, over which races were first held in May 1998, also has been an important factor in that growth, said Peter Berube, the track's vice president and general manager.

"They have a good turf course, and their dirt surface is one of the best in the country for keeping horses sound," said trainer Tom Proctor. "The weather is good, and it is one of the nicer places to train," said Proctor, who has had a winter stable at Tampa Bay Downs since 2002 and was fourth in victories with 22 in 2008.

Tampa Bay Downs' improvement in its racing product has helped it grow its handle over a period when some other U.S. tracks have experienced declines.

The track's average daily combined on-site and simulcast handle on its races was \$4,084,508 in 2007-2008. That was down less than 1% from its record \$4,106,164 in 2006-2007.

Between 2002 and 2007, average daily live handle at Tampa Bay Downs almost doubled from \$2.1 million to \$4.1 million.

The biggest increase in betting on Tampa Bay Downs races has come at race-tracks and other U.S. wagering locations outside Florida. That part of the average daily handle was \$1.6 million in 2001-2002. It has grown to approximately \$3.4 million in both 2006-2007 and 2007-2008.

Average daily attendance has held

steady at Tampa Bay Downs throughout the decade. That figure was 3,437 in 2007 and 3,398 in 2008.

As Tampa Bay Downs has built its status among winter-time tracks, many racing industry officials have noted that it is a major track that is not owned by a public company or other conglomerate.

Chester Ferguson, Stella Thayer's father, headed an investment group that in 1965 bought the track, then known as Sunshine Park. The track originally opened as Tampa Downs in 1926, was renamed Florida Downs and Turf Club in 1966, and Tampa Bay Downs in 1980.

The Thayer family became the sole owner in 1986.

"We felt there would be opportunities for growth," partly because of the ongoing population increase in the Tampa Bay market, Stella Thayer said.

Florida's 1989 introduction of simulcasting and the decision to install a turf course have been two of the most important developments for Tampa Bay Downs, she said.

The track has continued to gain local recognition, along with new fans, partly through the business and civic activities of Thayer and her husband, Bronson Thayer.

Stella Thayer, an attorney, is a member of the board of trustees of the Tampa General Hospital Foundation and of the University of South Florida Foundation.

Bronson Thayer is chairman of Tampa-based Bay Cities Bank, which focuses on lending to local businesses.

Stella Thayer is the current president of the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. She was president of the Thoroughbred Racing Associations in 1999 and 2000.

She also owns Thoroughbreds that race at Tampa Bay Downs and several other tracks.

Thayer said her family has considered buying other Thoroughbred tracks, but is "not looking at anything right now.

"We have looked at other tracks and done due diligence," she said. "We felt they would cost more than we thought they were worth. We would rather spend money on our own facility."

Thayer leaves Tampa Bay Downs' day-to-day management to Berube, who became general manager in 2001, and other operating officials.

"They own the place, and as long as you do things their way you are fine," said Proctor, whose main base is in Kentucky.

"They have always treated me with respect, and that respect is returned by me and others," he added. "That has helped bring in me and some of the other horsemen."

Proctor said the combination of Tampa Bay Downs' look and feel has been and remains one of its biggest attractions.

"It is what people always thought a race-track should look like," he said.

Tampa Bay Downs' building has a 4,300-seat grandstand and a 1,700-seat clubhouse.

The track is in a fast-growing suburban area, about 15 miles north of downtown Tampa and about 25 miles north of downtown St. Petersburg.

That road leading to the track has been a lingering and sometimes congested reminder of its semi-rural beginnings. Race Track Road is one lane in each direction. But the trip to Tampa Bay Downs will be faster starting in late 2009.

A new six-lane road that will run parallel to Race Track Road is under construction and scheduled for completion before the start of the track's 2009-2010 meet.

Tampa Bay Downs expects no obstruction or delays for fans and horsemen who

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use Race Track Road during the 2008-2009 meet, said Margo Flynn, the track's vice president of marketing and publicity.

On its property, Tampa Bay Downs this decade has spent an average \$1.25 million a year on renovations.

The new meet's most visible change will be provided by a tower with a camera that provides head-on coverage of turf races.

Tampa Bay Downs also has made several changes to improve its energy efficiency.

As part of a wide change in lighting use, it has converted its tote board to LED lighting.

On the backside, each stall has a new mat that prevents horses from digging through their bedding and into the dirt base. More waste will be removed from stalls each day, and maintenance crews will not have to replace as much dirt in stalls.

For bettors, Tampa Bay Downs will offer its first rolling daily doubles. The takeout will be 18%, which the track's research shows will be the industry's lowest for that bet.

On track, the purse for the Sam F. Davis Stakes, which was just elevated to grade III status for 2009, has been raised from \$200,000 to \$225,000.

That 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -mile race for 3-year olds will be held Feb. 14, four weeks prior to the Tampa Bay Derby. The race is named for the Tampa businessman who was the track's president during the 1970s.

Four Roses Thoroughbreds' Fierce Wind won this year's Sam F. Davis, fol-

lowed by Eric Fein's Big Truck who later won the Tampa Bay Derby.

Any Given Saturday and Bluegrass Cat, both owned by WinStar Farm (Padua Stables co-owned Any Given Saturday), won the Sam F. Davis in 2007 and 2006, respectively. Both went on to win the Haskell Invitational (gr. I) at Monmouth Park.

Obtaining graded stakes status for the 2010 Sam F. Davis is a major Tampa Bay Downs goal, Berube said.

Tampa Bay Downs "has been provid-

Breeders' Cup (gr. IIIT) at about 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ miles for fillies and mares 4-years old and up Feb. 14; the Florida Oaks (gr. III) at 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ miles for 3-year old fillies March 14; and the Hillsborough Stakes (gr. IIIT) at about 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ miles for older fillies and mares March 14.

The quality of fields in the Sam F. Davis and the Tampa Bay Derby have improved partly due to some changes 270 miles away at Gulfstream Park in Hallandale Beach on Florida's Atlantic Coast.

Since Gulfstream put in new racing surfaces in 2005, it has had a 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ -mile dirt track on which it has not been able to run 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -mile races. Many owners and trainers regard that distance as a big part of 3-year olds' progression toward the Triple Crown.

That situation has resulted in leading trainers such as Todd Pletcher, Carl Nafzger, Barclay Tagg, and Nick Zito vanning horses across Alligator Alley from Gulfstream or its Palm Meadows Training Center in Boynton Beach, Fla.

"The change at Gulfstream has given us an opportunity to attract trainers who want to run at 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ miles in our stakes and other races," Berube said.

Gulfstream's 2005 changes were built around putting in a wider turf course, thus helping improve the important turf component of its program, said Bill Murphy, the track's president and general manager. That change required making the new dirt course 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ miles, rather than the previous mile.


"We are very satisfied with our program for 3-year olds," Murphy said. He noted that seven of the last nine Triple Crown races were won by horses that ran at Gulfstream.

"We are happy to see that Tampa Bay Downs is doing well because that is good for racing," Murphy added.

Tampa Bay Downs set its all-time attendance record of 12,746 on Tampa Bay Derby day March 15, 2008.

Many fans came to see Robert LaPenta's War Pass, the 2007 Juvenile Eclipse Award winner. But the Zito-trained War Pass had a troubled trip and finished last in the field of seven horses. Big Truck, trained by Tagg, won the race by a neck over Dogwood Stable's Atoned.

In addition to Festival day March 14, Tampa Bay Downs will feature four other 2008-2009 multiple-stakes days.

The Dec. 27 Cotillion Festival will have a full-card of races for 2-year olds. Scheduled Jan. 17 are the Pasco and Gasparilla Stakes for 3-year-olds. Festival Preview day, with the Sam F. Davis, will be Feb. 14. Florida Cup Day, with six stakes for Florida-breds will be April 4. 



Stella Thayer, president and treasurer of Tampa Bay Downs

ing information about the Sam F. Davis" to members of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association's graded stakes committee, Berube said.

"We are cautiously optimistic that the Sam F. Davis will be favorably evaluated," he said.

In addition to the Sam F. Davis and Tampa Bay Derby, Tampa Bay Downs' 2009 graded stakes are: the Endeavour



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