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PRAIRIE MEADOWS shifts gears to Quarter Horse racing Aug. 19

By Martha Claussen

While the Straw Poll and internationally-acclaimed Iowa State Fair might be hogging the recent headlines in Iowa, "America's Fastest Athletes" will garner attention when the 2011 Quarter Horse meet at Prairie Meadows gets underway Aug. 19.

Located in the Des Moines suburb of Altoona, Prairie Meadows closed out the Thoroughbred season Aug. 13 and will host a 26-day dedicated Quarter Horse meet beginning this Friday which will continue through Oct. 1.

Second year as a dedicated Quarter Horse meet

Quarter Horse Racing Secretary Chad Keller feels confident that the momentum is strong for a successful racing season.

"In 2010 our inaugural straight Quarter Horse season exceeded our expectations," said Keller. "We accomplished a great deal, due largely to the support of our horsemen who brought in quality horses."

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Keller is pleased that last year's leading trainers Charley Hunt, Stacy Charette-Hill, Glen Atkinson, Ed Ross Hardy, Juan Torres, Jose Ibarra and Kenny Laymon are returning. New additions will be Casey Willis and Judd Kearl, who won his third Sam Houston Race Park training title in May.

Iowa Double Gold Futurity kicks off stakes schedule

Iowa-breds will be featured opening weekend with the Iowa Double Gold Futurity and IQHRA Sale Futurity as the first of 21 stakes set for the meet. Prairie Meadows hosts regional qualifiers for the Bank of America Challenge on Labor Day weekend with three Challenge Stakes on Friday, Sept. 2, and three more, including the Prairie Meadows Bank of America Challenge on Saturday, Sept. 3.

Last year, Iowa was well-represented in the Bank of America Challenge Championships with Spit Curl Diva, Plain Brown Rapper, Acorn and De Passem Okey all topping other regional qualifiers in the championship stakes at Fair Grounds in New Orleans.

"We were excited and proud to see how well our horses did at the Bank of America Challenge Championship," said Keller. "It was a great feeling to see Prairie Meadows winners perform successfully elsewhere."

The final weekend of the meet will feature nine stakes with Prairie Meadows Quarter Horse Champions Night on Sept. 30 and the $125,000 Jim Bader Futurity and $100,000 Polk County Derby on Oct. 1.

Keller reports that daily purses will average $115,000- $120,000.

AQHA Supreme Horse Spit Curl Diva set a new track record in the Grade 3, Keokuk Stakes Aug. 10, 2010 at Prairie Meadows.

Photo by Jack Coady/Coady Photography

Spit Curl Diva returns on opening weekend

Opening weekend will feature the Grade 3, Keokuk Stakes at 400 yards, and one of the best mares in the country, Spit Curl Diva, will defend her title. The 5-year-old Oklahoma-bred daughter of Spit Curl Jess, has won 17 of her 33 career starts and bankrolled $745,702 for the Lepic-Morgan Partnership of Iowa City, Iowa. Sensational wins in both the Refrigerator Handicap (Grade 1) at Lone Star Park last October and her victory in the Merial Distaff Challenge Championship (Grade 1) Nov. 19 at Fair Grounds vaulted Spit Curl Diva into elite status in the industry. Based on her earnings of $500,000 and 10 victories, including two or more open Grade 1 stakes races, Spit Curl Diva was honored as an American Quarter Horse Association Supreme Race Horse.

She is just the 24th horse since 1983 to receive the prestigious award.

"She's one of a kind," acknowledges owner Tom Lepic. "We had a late start this year as we pulled two embryos when she was bred to Corona Cartel and First Down Dash. She just returned to Prairie Meadows and we are excited to see her run on opening weekend."

Lepic has been a respected ambassador in both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred racing in Iowa. His 2-year-old Thoroughbred filly, Here Comes Polly won the $85,066 Iowa Sorority Stakes, a 6-furlong contest on Aug. 6. Named after Lepic's wife, Polly, the victory garnered one of the best headlines in recent history when the Des Moines Register recapped the win with " Here Comes Polly Wins, and Owners Live Happily Ever After".

"Iowans are gangbusters to support

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successful horses in the state," noted Keller. "We saw that with the great run of Paddy O Prado and certainly have seen a tremendous amount of excitement for Spit Curl Diva."

Strong partnership between Prairie Meadows and the Iowa QHRA

The Iowa Quarter Horse Racing Association (IQHRA) was founded in 1976 and boasts a growing membership with strong support for both racing and breeding in the state. Current president Tom Lepic has leapt into his leadership role with tremendous passion and a multitude of new ideas and programs.

Tom Lepic

Lepic was a jockey from 1971 to 1978 before a serious accident ended his career. He returned to the sport of Quarter Horse racing in 1993 as an owner and breeder, and perhaps fueled by the incredible success of his mare, Spit Curl Diva, Lepic is committed to see Quarter Horse racing thrive in Iowa.

"This has been an exciting year," said Lepic. "I have logged 20,000 miles so far, but we have made great strides legislatively which is so important for breeding. With that accomplished, we are working hard to make Iowa a premier state for racing."

One of the goals of IQHRA is to build fan interest in the sport of Quarter Horse racing and many meetings have taken place at Prairie Meadows. Lepic is effusive in his praise for the marketing team, led by Jeff Nelson and Michelle Weigel.

"Jeff has great vision and Michelle has a passion for Quarter Horse racing," said Lepic. "We came to them with some ideas for attracting new fans and they were wide open to and extremely receptive."

Lepic, who was a member of the University of Iowa wrestling team, suggested bringing some of the Iowa coaches to Prairie Meadows.

On opening night, Aug. 19, the University of Iowa's wrestling team and celebrated Olympians, Tom and Terry Brands, will meet and greet fans and sign autographs at Prairie Meadows. Hawkeye basketball head coach Fran McCaffery will make an appearance on Aug. 26.

The annual IQHRA awards banquet, previously held in January, will take place at Prairie Meadows on Aug. 28. Lepic credits Brenda Onstot, who chairs the IQHRA Youth and Banquet committee for her tireless efforts.

"We feel that we can attract more people by having our banquet in August," said Lepic. "It will be easier for trainers to attend, and we hope to add new members. Tad Leggett, who is so well-respected in the industry, will be our speaker."

One other program the IQHRA initiated this year was to arrange an office on the backside which is manned in the mornings by IQHRA executive secretary John Hernandez. Hernandez, who is bilingual, has been helpful in communicating updates and information on programs and services to many of the horsemen and backstretch workers.

"We are all very happy with the direction Tom has taken his affiliate," said Keller. "The horsemen, IQHRA and the staff at Prairie Meadows are working toward the same goals. We have an outstanding relationship with Tom and feel that we can accomplish a great deal."

Jockey "Cam" to debut in ads and on the big screen

Stormy Smith

Stormy Smith, who tied with William Ives as leading rider for the 2010 Quarter Horse meet, looks forward to opening weekend. The 33-year-old jockey was born in Ruidoso, N.M., but his wife, Bridget, grew up in Iowa. He enjoyed the first dedicated Quarter Horse meet last year and will ride for a number of horsemen including Casey Willis, who will have 15 horses at Prairie Meadows.

"Last year worked out well; better than I thought it would," said Smith. "I enjoy riding at Prairie Meadows. They have a very good track surface and work hard to keep it in good shape and sound for us."

Smith agreed to wear a helmet camera earlier this month in trials for the Iowa Double Gold Futurity and Iowa Double Gold Derby. The videos will be used in advertisements and promotional spots throughout the meet to illustrate the speed and excitement of Quarter Horse racing.

"That thing was weird," admitted Smith. "It didn't weigh much, but I had to really concentrate on not letting it affect my balance. Bridget thought I was nuts to wear it when I was qualifying horses for the futurity, but it will be cool to see the footage."

Post times and promotions

Live racing at Prairie Meadows is set for Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 6:30 p.m. (CT). On Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 5, post time will be moved to 4 p.m. (CT) so racing fans will be able to watch and wager on the $2.4 million All American Futurity from Ruidoso Downs. Racing fans of all ages are invited to attend "Morning at the Meadows" on Saturday, Aug. 27 at 8 a.m. to get an up close and personal look at the world of Quarter Horse racing.

Visitors can enjoy the casino on the Prairie Meadows property. In addition to 2,000 slot machines, casino games are offered including Blackjack, Roulette, and Craps, Progressive Pai Gow, Three-Card Poker, Crazy 4 Poker, Mini-Baccarat, Mississippi Stud and Ultimate Texas Hold 'em

Free concerts are offered at the Finish Line Show Lounge and tickets are on sale for the Los Lobos and The Fabulous Thunderbirds live concert on Sept. 8. For a complete listing of race dates, special events and promotions, visit www.prairiemeadows.com.

Martha Claussen has been prominent in the Texas racing industry since 1997 as a publicist, writer and handicapper.