



Fair Grounds Moves Up Start Date for 2008-09

Fair Grounds will expand its racing season by two weeks next season and begin a locally based meet prior to Thanksgiving for the first time in nearly 30 years, track president Randy Soth announced Tuesday.

The 2008-09 racing season at Fair Grounds, which marks the 137th racing season at the nation's third-oldest track, will begin on Friday, Nov. 14, the earliest starting date on record. The 87-day meet will continue through March 29, 2009. Fair Grounds' racing calendar was submitted to the Louisiana State Racing Commission on Tuesday, and the LSRC will consider the schedule for approval at its meeting on Friday.

The 20-week schedule will feature racing every Friday through Sunday, with Thursday racing from Thanksgiving through March 19 (except Christmas and Feb. 26) and Mondays added to the schedule from Dec. 22 through Feb. 23. Also on the schedule is one live day of racing each on Tuesday – on Mardi Gras Day, Feb. 24 – and Wednesday – on New Year's Eve.

"With the continued influx of purse money from other forms of gaming, we were looking to grow the number of dates on our schedule," Soth said. "In the end, we felt it was best to move up the start date as opposed to expanding the number of five-day racing weeks. (Fair Grounds cannot extend its season into April because of preparations for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.)

"We see multiple opportunities in moving up our start date," Soth continued. "There are opportunities for our state-breds to get a prep race over our track before Louisiana Champions Day. Our employees, many of whom are new each year, will have the opportunity to work two weeks of racing before we experience one of our biggest on-track days of the year on Thanksgiving. And our customers can now enjoy 20 weeks of live racing."

In an abbreviated 2005-06 season at Louisiana Downs in Bossier City, Fair Grounds opened the weekend prior to Thanksgiving. The last time an opening day in New Orleans was held prior to Thanksgiving was a five-year stretch from 1975-79.

"While we understand and are sympathetic to those who believe Fair Grounds should open on Thanksgiving Day," Soth said, "we believe this change presents the best scenario for our various customer bases – our fans, our horsemen and our employees."

Fair Grounds' stakes schedule will be announced this summer.

Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots, the nation's third-oldest Thoroughbred racing facility, has been in operation since 1872. Located in New Orleans, Fair Grounds is owned by Churchill Downs Incorporated (NASDAQ Global Select Market: CHDN); it also operates a slot-machine gaming facility and nine off-track betting parlors throughout southeast Louisiana. Information about Fair Grounds can be found on the Internet at www.fairgroundsracecourse.com.