

Track has 500 horses ready to run

RACING: With deal in works to save it, the Fort Erie Race Track is quickly swinging back into business

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March 20, 2009

After a long winter's sleep, the Fort Erie Race Track is coming out of hibernation.

With more than a month before opening day, maintenance crews are already out on the field getting the 111-year-old border oval ready to begin receiving horses this weekend. Laid-off employees are being recalled to work and if all goes according to plan, training should begin Monday, said spokesman Daryl Wells Jr.

"We had a meeting last week with our management team and that was one of our priorities: How fast can we get the stable open, and how fast can we get the track ready to go," Wells said Thursday.

"The track's looking pretty good."

Until a week ago, it looked as though the track might not open for a 112th season.

That was before an 11th-hour deal was struck between the track owner Nordic Gaming and the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp. The EDTC, an agency of the Town of Fort Erie, is attempting to buy the track for \$35 million and set it up as a not-for-profit entity.

The arrangement allows for a 78-day live racing season to get underway May 2 while the parties continue to negotiate terms of sale, work out financing and develop a business plan.

Given the uncertainty that surrounded the future of the track even before the close of last season, one of the first challenges confronting operators is ensuring there's enough horses to have a good meet.

Wells says he's optimistic.

So far, the track has received more than 500 applications for stalls. The track can accommodate 1,000.

"They're coming in at a pretty good pace," said Wells. "It's a good indication, considering the deal was just put together last week."

Wells said the "vast majority" of applications received to date have been from local trainers who want to come back. He's expecting more applications over the coming weeks.

"Obviously, we have some Fort Erie trainers based at Woodbine right now that will be shipping out of Woodbine and returning to Fort Erie in the next month or so, which is always the case each year," he said.

"We'll be making some phone calls, too, to some of the trainers who have yet to put in an application. We can accommodate approximately 1,000 horses.

"Of course, you'd like to fill it up if you could. Ideally, we'd get 800 or so that would really help us with the season."

The company is in the process of rescinding layoff notices issued over the past couple of months, when it looked like the track wouldn't reopen. Some workers are already on site, and more will return as operations in the various departments get up and running.

EDTC general manager Jim Thibert said the number of stall applications received so far is encouraging.

"We need as big of a roster as we can, so the (provincial) government believes that everybody actually wants to race and people actually want racing."