

## Owners enthusiastic as racetrack officially opens

By Matt Day

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The sights of horses trotting, trainers grooming and owners smiling could be seen inside the Fort Erie Racetrack as the historic oval officially opened its gates for the 112th year last Friday.

“Everybody is happy, no question about it,” said spokesman Daryl Wells Jr. “It’s business as usual and it’s time to get things going.”

By Monday morning, a handful of stalls had already been filled and riders could be seen taking their thoroughbreds out to the practice ring as some early arrivals started setting up the stalls.

Despite all of the uncertainty and talks of closure, Wells said everything is running according to plan.

“We’re on time as far as getting the horses in and getting the track ready. The only thing we were late in was getting the stall applications out.”



Gord Mitchell directs his wife’s horse, Bilboe, into one of the stalls at the Fort Erie Racetrack on Tuesday morning. Mitchell, who doubles as the track’s ambulance driver, said he always believed the track would remain open. The 2009 season begins May 2 and will run until Oct. 27 with 78 live race dates set.

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So far the track has received 800 applications. Wells said he is hoping to have about 500 to 600 horses who are eligible to compete come opening day.

John Sanelli, a hometown trainer and owner, was just happy to be able to put all of the uncertainty behind him.

“We didn’t know what was happening, but I felt confident in knowing the racetrack would keep going,” Sanelli said. “I enjoy this place, I know all of the people here and it’s like home.”

As soon as he had received news the track would be remaining open, he said he cancelled his trip to see his daughter in California in order to concentrate on getting ready for the upcoming season.

Tom Steer, another Fort Erie trainer, could be seen finishing up moving in his five horses Tuesday morning. He, along with many others, patiently waited to hear what would happen.

“Things are looking pretty good now, but that definitely wasn’t the case during the winter.”

A deal between track owner Nordic Gaming and the Fort Erie Economic Development and Tourism Corp. ensured the track would live to see another season when it seemed nothing else could be done.

The 2009 live racing season begins May 2.