

State's cure for horse racing calls for tripled purses, fewer racing days at Monmouth Park

By [Tom Luicci/The Star-Ledger](#)

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Monmouth Park's thoroughbred schedule would be cut nearly in half, but its purse structure would be tripled to an industry-leading \$1 million a day under a plan to save the state's ailing horse racing industry, according to two people directly involved in the discussions.

The plan, expected to be formally announced as early as next week, is aimed at drawing bigger fields and higher-quality horses to Monmouth Park during its spring/summer meet. That, in turn, would generate enough revenue to help offset a projected \$22 million loss this year for the state's horse racing industry.

The focus on Monmouth Park would mean the end of fall thoroughbred racing at the Meadowlands Racetrack in East Rutherford, said the two people, who asked not to be identified because they are not allowed to publicly discuss the plan. Harness racing would still be held at the Meadowlands.

Under the plan, Monmouth Park would conduct a 50-day meet with racing on Friday, Saturday and Sunday (plus the three Monday holidays) from May 22 through Labor Day, the two people said.

Monmouth would also offer daily purses of \$1 million, tops in North America. Last year, the track's daily purses averaged \$330,000 for 93 dates.

Saratoga Race Course in upstate New York, which races in late July and August and is the primary competition for Monmouth, offered \$729,100 in average daily purses last year, tops in the sport.

Monmouth would also hold a second, 21-date meet from mid-September until Nov. 23, during which it will offer daily purses of between \$250,000 and \$300,000, the two people said.

Monmouth now conducts a Wednesday through Sunday schedule from June through August.

Amending the thoroughbred racing schedule will require legislative approval since under law, the New Jersey Sports & Exposition Authority, which runs the Meadowlands and Monmouth Park, must race 141 days a year.

Proponents expect the Legislature to approve the plan, which has the backing of Gov. Chris Christie, the state's Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association and the sports authority, the two people said. Christie appointed a seven-member commission earlier this month to study gaming, sports and entertainment in the state. This plan is an outgrowth of that commission, they said.

Sports Authority President and CEO Dennis Robinson, commission member Bob Mulcahy and Monmouth vice president and general manager Bob Kulina all declined to comment on the proposal last night, as did Christie's office.

New Jersey's horse racing industry is expected to lose \$22 million, according to the governor's projections. However, that figure does not include \$9 million in wagering generated from the state-owned off-track wagering sites and phone betting.

The horsemen's association and sports authority are expected to meet soon to sign off on the plan.

By offering the highest purses in the country, Monmouth hopes to attract larger fields and better horses for the 12 races it will contest each day. That, in turn, is expected to lead to a significant increase in handle, or total amount of money wagered each day.

The plan is modeled after similar approaches in Japan and Australia, where most horse racing is held on weekends only with huge purses offered.

In addition to eliminating two days of operating costs, the sports authority would also see a major savings by not having to convert the Meadowlands Racetrack from a surface for thoroughbreds to one for harness racing, as it does every year.

The harness racing industry would benefit by being able to choose better late fall dates at the Meadowlands because of the absence of thoroughbred racing.

Last year, Monmouth Park averaged \$409,380 in handle per day and \$3.1 million overall when simulcasting was factored in. Early projections are that Monmouth could triple its handle on live racing while seeing the overall handle grow to more than \$5 million per day the first year.