

NEWS RELEASE

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JOCKEY LEON LOOKING TO MAKE AN IMPACT AT MONMOUTH MEET AS PACO LOPEZ SETS SIGHTS ON A RECORD-TYING 13TH RIDING TITLE

OCEANPORT, N.J. – Sonny Leon fully understands that he – along with every other rider in the jockeys’ room at Monmouth Park – is a longshot to unseat perennial champion Paco Lopez at the Jersey Shore track this summer. But it’s not as if the 36-year-old Venezuelan hasn’t delivered on an unlikely longshot before.

Leon will embark on his second year based at Monmouth Park starting with the May 9 opener emboldened by better connections, more familiarity and renewed confidence. Whether that will be enough to make a run at Lopez for leading rider honors remains to be seen.

But Leon is eager to try.

“I’m very competitive, I like to win,” said Leon, who guided 80-1 Rich Strike to victory in the 2022 Kentucky Derby with a masterful ride. “I try to go into every meet thinking I can be leading rider. It’s not going to be easy beating Paco. But I know more people at Monmouth Park now so we’ll see if I can use those connections to have an even better year than last year (when he was fourth in the Monmouth Park standings).”

What he’s up against is probably akin to the daunting challenge Rich Strike faced four years ago in a bulky Kentucky Derby field. Lopez will be seeking his record-tying 13th riding title and eighth straight overall this year and is coming off a year that saw him finish second nationally in wins with 325.

Joe Bravo currently stands alone with 13 Monmouth titles.

“For me, it’s a big thing to tie Joe Bravo,” said Lopez. “He was a great rider here for many, many years.

“The record is something that is in your mind as you are winning titles but you never think it can happen. Every year the goal was just to win a title. But you never think about 13 of them and tying Joe Bravo. That seemed to be impossible, but here I am.”

Bravo won his last Monmouth Park riding title in 2007, the same year Lopez started riding in the United States.

“I was still riding quarter horses then, too,” he said.

The 40-year-old native of Veracruz, Mexico, said he will maintain the same schedule as he had last year, splitting time between Monmouth Park and Colonial Downs, where he also won the riding title last year.

“Nothing is really changing for me. I have the same plan for the summer as I had last year,” said Lopez, who has more than 4,400 career wins.

Leon will also be riding at nearby tracks when Monmouth Park is not racing but said Monmouth is where his focus will be.

“I think I had a good meet for my first time at Monmouth last summer,” said Leon, who owns three riding titles at Mahoning Valley and finished in the top three in wins and earnings at the recently-completed Tampa Downs meet. “Your first year at a new place you are trying to figure things out a little. I’m expecting to be even stronger this year.”

Though Rich Strike remains in his rearview mirror, Leon said he is still benefitting from that victory.

“Most people don’t follow Ohio racing the way they do racing in Kentucky, New York, California and Florida,” said Leon, who started riding in the United States in 2015. “By winning the Kentucky Derby people now know who Sonny Leon is. People see my talent. They know I can ride in big races. I have not stopped working hard, so it has opened a lot of doors for me.”

Regulars returning to the Monmouth Park jockey room include Jomar Torres and Jorge A. Vargas, Jr.

Among the other riders expected this summer are Eric Cancel, Jose Gomez, Jorge Gonzalez, Gabriel Maldonado, Christian Maragh, Francisco Martinez, Charlie Marquez, Ramon Moya, Luis Rivera, and Martina Rojas.

The 50-day Monmouth Park meet will feature 36 stakes races worth \$5.85 million.

First race post time on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays is 12:50 p.m. Post time for Friday racing, which begins June 20, is 2 p.m.

Parking is free throughout the meet.