

THE PLEDGE

Among California owners, the racing industry at large, fans and bettors, the overriding consensus is that the integrity of our sport is in bad shape, and we need to do a better job of handling health and safety issues for thoroughbred horses. Here in California, we recognized that medication issues were of paramount importance several years ago, and today we have some of the best medication rules and penalties in the country. From initiating TCO2 testing to eliminating steroid abuse, over the past four years we have seen regulations enacted in this state to bring back integrity to our sport. Research done by the NTRA over the last year shows us that everyone at every level, including industry insiders, believes that the sport needs to make integrity its number one priority.

Here in California, TOC's own initial owner's survey results show us the same polling statistics. The problem has always been that each state decides its own regulations separately, and not everyone is on the same page. Coupled with a lack of uniform regulations is the lack of accurate data being collected on a national scale on equine injuries and fatalities. Testing labs in some states do not meet the standards necessary for accurate results, and some tracks are either too small or too lax to initiate needed safety and medication testing reforms. Often, when infractions did occur, in the past, penalties were not handed out fairly or at all. The RMTC (Racing Medication & Testing Consortium) has been in existence for many years, but reforms on a state-by-state basis have been slow to come, leading to a perception that as an industry, we just don't care about these issues.

But in the last year, we have seen a major shift in the industry. Finally, whether through the Eight Belles crisis, the move by Congress to crack down on steroid abuse in all sports, or the spotlight by the public and the media on medication abuses, the industry as a whole is coming together to finally get real reform enacted on a national basis. The NTRA has come up with a plan under what they call the "NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance." The Alliance is composed of NTRA board members plus a broad cross section of other racing and breeding interests including farms, sales companies and veterinarians as well as racing fans. Among the reforms the Alliance is pushing for are an accreditation and certification process for regulators, tracks and sales companies. Instead of waiting for states to enact model rules on drug testing, medication use and penalties, tracks and owners are being asked to adopt these reforms through house rules starting in 2009. By 2010 they expect all states and racing commissions to have enacted those rules.

Included among the Alliance initiatives are the development of a national reporting system for injuries and fatalities, the promotion of a safer racing environment through a set of best practices and a program to advance safety research while developing accreditation for testing labs through the RMTC. Jockey safety and welfare as well as a program for retired racehorses are part of the national commitment as well. Industry members are being asked at this moment to sign "The Pledge" to reform our industry and make the health and safety of our equine and human athletes priority number one.

The Thoroughbred Owners of California was one of the first organizations to sign The Alliance's Pledge. By making integrity in our sport our main concern in 2008, the NTRA has launched itself into the type of organization that this industry desperately needs: one that unifies, leads and addresses the major issues facing the racing industry today. Now it is up to us to see that every organization and track signs The Pledge and that The Alliance works to make integrity in our sport a reality and not just a dream.



Marsha Naify