

Hooray for Hollywood!

Cue the music: “Hooray for Hollywood...something, something, something, Hollywood.”

Yes, that silence everyone has heard roaring on the Westside of Los Angeles is the barely audible sound of horses training over the new, engineered Cushion Track racing surface at Hollywood Park. It has been said by many that horses training over the surface just seem “happier,” but no more so than the owners and trainers of those horses!

Congratulations and thanks are due the owner of Hollywood Park - Bay Meadows Land Company (“BMLC”). Despite some self-inflicted uncertainty, BMLC came through as the first California track owner/operator to install the kinder, gentler racing surface; one more likely to protect the long-term health of horses and riders.

With owners - for years - being the one group bearing the greatest financial and emotional burden every time a horse was injured racing or training, this development could not have come at a better time. It seems that there has been far too much acrimony, bad news, and splintered political agendas over the past year for anyone to endure. It was time for some “good news,” and Hollywood Park's new surface is certainly that!

If industry predictions hold true, this surface - and those scheduled to be installed at both Del Mar and Golden Gate Fields next year - should help to improve horses' soundness, and thus their ability to race injury-free more frequently. The surface can already be credited with attracting renewed interest in California racing from out-of-state stables, and fans. In fact, several of those stables have indicated their intent to ship west in November, if not before.

Increased field size is also an anticipated benefit of the new surface, which - if it happens - will do much to improve the attractiveness of California race signals as a betting product. That too could not occur at a better time. Years of declining field sizes have taken a toll on track and purse revenues, and if not corrected - either through improved racing surfaces or fewer racing dates - would eventually doom California racing.

It's encouraging to see those realities appreciated by current California racetrack ownership, who are finally making the types of capital investment needed to reverse some of the troubling trends that have undermined this industry for nearly a decade. Equally important is the fact that our track partners seem to have discovered better means to target more marketing dollars into their local markets, and the investment is paying off. Over the past two years, the meets at Santa Anita, Del Mar, and Fairplex have seen new and/or sustained growth in attendance, and to a lesser extent, handle. This too is “good news!”

Indications are that Hollywood Park management intends to improve its marketing in the same way, beginning with the upcoming Fall meet. If that effort in anyway resembles its efforts in introducing the first engineered racing surface to California, then more good news awaits us all.

At this time next year, I suspect that I will have the good fortune of reporting to owners that the new racing surfaces at Del Mar and Golden Gate Fields have proven to be unqualified successes, and that Santa Anita's engineered surface will be installed during the summer of '08. I am also hopeful that some time next year, TOC will announce that the industry has secured legitimate commitments from Sacramento as to some form of tribal gaming mitigation for us all.

While the latter bit of great news is - at present - admittedly based primarily on hope and trust, the balance of this good news is premised on fact. California racing is beginning to turn the corner; count on it!



Drew J. Couto

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several large, sweeping loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.