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Putting Safety First Occasionally Requires the Taking of Some Risk

Sometimes tragedy – such as the unfortunate breakdown of a horse – is an uncanny motivator. It is perhaps the single most common aspect of racing to motivate owners to reject complacency in the search to find new means to reduce – if not eliminate – the risk of injury to horse and rider alike. In the course of that search, nearly five years ago certain California track and horsemen's interests began taking a closer – much closer – look at engineered racing surfaces in use in Europe. While admittedly not subjected to the same daily volume of use our tracks in California experience, these surfaces nonetheless showed enough promise to warrant serious consideration of their use here.

After further due diligence inquiries including the evaluation of potential toxicity threats, environmental concerns, maintenance practices and schedules, replacement costs, etc., it seemed the industry unanimously agreed: *Prudence dictated that we embrace these new technologies, as they were demonstrated and, perhaps more importantly, perceived by those who actually use them on a daily basis to provide a more consistent, safer racing surface.*

Yet, as with any “new technology,” we did expect there to be a “learning curve;” i.e., some period of adjustment and refinement in the materials, practices, and personnel used to maintain the surfaces. We also anticipated that during this period second-guessers would step forward in “I told you so” fashion, suggesting that it was unwise to adopt this technology until every uncertainty was known and assessed. Evidently, they are not as convinced that whatever yet to be identified “risks” associated with these new surfaces were substantially outweighed by an immediate and genuine need to minimize the risks of injury to horse and rider.

Thankfully, most California racing associations rejected calls for the status quo, electing instead to pursue these new racing surface technologies. Del Mar is the latest to do so, and we thank and commend them for the investment, and for the courage to take “a risk” in seeking means to improve safety! Polytrack – admittedly a “work in progress” – has shown great promise and, based on early reactions from horsemen, represents a vast improvement over the track's prior dirt racing surface. Make no mistake; the majority of horsemen training on Polytrack surfaces nationally feel strongly that a less than perfect Polytrack is far better than a “good” dirt track.

To everyone's credit, California's efforts to improve safety do not begin and end with the installation of engineered racing surfaces. Rather that is but one part of an ongoing effort to improve safety conditions both in the barn area and on track. Under the oversight of the California Horsemen's Safety Alliance (“CHSA”) – a non-profit joint venture of the TOC and CTT initially established to improve backstretch safety conditions as a means of reducing the industry's workmen's compensations costs – additional safety programs have been implemented or are being developed. Those programs include bilingual safety materials and videos for backstretch workers, the establishment of “best practices” for common stable operations, development of new safety helmets and vests presently undergoing rigorous ASTM testing, coordination of a detailed national study of actual and potential dietary health risks for riders, the acquisition of over 100 sets of wire reinforced so-called “safety reigns” for use and evaluation by licensed California riders and trainers, etc.

Every day, the CHSA and its staff work to find new ways to protect from injury those who work in this industry. They do it largely as an invisible, underappreciated force, to whom we all owe our gratitude! On behalf of our 9,000 members, TOC says, “Thank You!”

As responsible Thoroughbred owners, please do your part to improve safety conditions on the backstretch and race course. Make certain to remind your trainer to take full advantage of the various programs California racing offers. Doing so will benefit not only that stable, but the totality of the industry by further reducing insurance and other related business costs, and more importantly by protecting our horses and their riders from avoidable mishaps! After all, we're in this together, so let's act that way!

Have a great summer!