

# Gary Stevens Speaks Out On Synthetic Surfaces



*On February 20th, retired Hall of Fame jockey Gary Stevens took part in a special purpose meeting conducted by the California Horse Racing Board for a comprehensive discussion of California's racing surfaces. Stevens, now a host on HRTV, joined jockeys Garret Gomez and David Flores, along with Terry Meyocks, national manager of the Jockeys' Guild, in presenting the riders' viewpoint. Later, Stevens spoke to Owners' Circle about his experience and impressions of synthetic surfaces in general.*

## Which different synthetic tracks have you ridden on?

I actually only rode races on two synthetic tracks before I retired. At Turfway Park, the first year that they put theirs in, I rode the Kentucky Cup races. I rode nine races that day. My knees were to the point that if I rode more than five or six horses a day I couldn't ride the next day. But I rode nine that day, and I felt like I could have ridden another nine afterwards. I didn't have any swelling in my knees, and I came back and rode the next day.

In 2004, I rode in France. A lot of people don't know that there are synthetic tracks there. In Deauville, France, they have an unbelievable synthetic surface.

I've been on Del Mar's Polytrack and Santa Anita's surface. I was on it when it was all Cushion Track, and I've been on it since they got the mixture of Pro-Ride.

## Did you notice a big difference between Cushion Track and the existing surface?

I was fortunate that I got on the Cushion Track early on, before the rains hit or anything. And I loved it. As far as going over it, I can't feel any difference now, compared to when it was Cushion Track – and I want to make that clear – before the rains hit and it was still what I considered an excellent surface. Since I've been on this, I really can't tell any difference in the way the horses get over it; they all seem to be very comfortable.

I think there's a definite transition time for the horses. I think where a lot of the mistakes have been made, people have not given their horses time to adjust to the switch in surface, and some of the soreness that the horses are getting back behind is related to them just going immediately from one surface to the other and thinking that they've got a horse that's fit enough to handle that. I think you get a much fitter horse after they've been training on a synthetic surface. The way I explain it, it's like if you were running on the beach every day where the tide comes in and it's packed down, and then you go up and run on the beach sand; you're going to be sore the next day. You have to work into it gradually, and I think that a lot of these trainers thought that there is not going to be any adjustment. I believe that they have to adjust their training to the surface, and just admit that.

To me, any synthetic surface is safer and better for the hors-

es than the tracks we had. These tracks were freeways out here on the West Coast. They were jarring; I felt it through the horses. I think any synthetic surface is better than what we had in the past.

## What do you think are the main benefits to horse and rider?

Obviously the catastrophic injuries are way down. And if the catastrophic injuries are way down on the horses, then they're going to be way down on the riders as well. So, that's the biggest benefit.

## Do the riders have a higher level of confidence about their safety?

I know I did. It was the consistency. I know that one of the problems here, when the problems started, was the inconsistency in the racetrack. But when we had the dirt tracks they were very, very inconsistent. We never raced on the same surface in the afternoon that we were riding on in the morning. There were deep spots, there were hard spots, and I don't think generally speaking that you get that with any of the synthetic tracks, if they're done properly.

It's tough to use this [Santa Anita's current] track as an example. Everybody knows it's been a catastrophe this winter, but I think to judge the synthetic tracks based on what we've had here – at this one track – this winter is not fair.

## What were your impressions of the Polytrack at Del Mar?

Obviously when they put that in I was retired, but I worked several horses for Wesley Ward over the summer last year. I think that the riders have to be more observant. I think that the horses are very comfortable, and they tend to want to do more on it and use themselves up. They think they're going easy, and all of the sudden your tank of gas is empty.

What I did is I'd work them 3/8 and let them gallop out until I felt them start to get tired, and I wouldn't let them hurt themselves. Injuries happen in horses, just like humans, when they start to get tired. Whether you're running or doing any type of physical sport, the chances of getting injured are much higher



*Stream Cat, with Gary Stevens up, wins the 2005 Kentucky Cup Juvenile on the synthetic track at Turfway.*

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*Hall of Fame jockey Gary Stevens*

when you're getting tired. And it's the same with the horses.

Races are won in the last eighth of a mile, and I think that a lot of people have enjoyed pretty much going wide open in sprint races in California for years and years, and you can't do that any more. And to me that's not horse racing anyway. I enjoyed going back East and riding a more patient race, and always believed if you went too fast early you were supposed to pay the price at the end. So, I think that the rider's got to be a lot more conscious of what they're doing, whether they're working horses in the morning or riding races in the afternoon.

### **Do you think we're going to see an evolution in the way races are run in California?**

Absolutely. It's already happened. I think the races have become a lot more formful. Here we see some cheaper claiming races with full fields of 10 horses with only three lengths separating first to last. It makes for more

exciting races, and the field sizes are up. The transformation is probably going to be more in the breeding end of it. I think people will start looking for different horses to breed to. I feel bad for the people that have strictly speed sires, but how long did those horses last that were strictly speed horses?

### **What do you see as the future for synthetic tracks?**

I think they're here to stay. I think that the advocates really outweigh the people against it. I sat up there at those hearings a couple weeks ago, and then when I heard that there was a chance that this track was going to go back to dirt, I thought I must have been sitting at the wrong hearing... They were open forums and open panels, and it wasn't even close [those favoring synthetics over dirt].

As a horse owner now, if they go back to dirt tracks my horses won't be running here, I can tell you that.