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Racing seeks balance in regulating some steroids

By JEFFREY McMURRAY

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — In this age of juiced sprinters, cyclists and power hitters, the Kentucky Derby wants to make sure America's signature thoroughbred race won't be won by a juiced horse.

That doesn't necessarily mean the race is steroid-free.

The stigma of chemical-based cheating may be gone thanks to screening for anabolic steroids prior to last year's Derby. But top industry officials say a more controversial battle against a different kind of steroid abuse could be looming.

Derby track veterinarian Larry Bramlage says he expects the "next frontier" of drug testing will involve a crackdown on a type of steroids that reduces swelling rather than builds muscle. When used properly, these so-called corticosteroids provide major therapeutic benefits in easing arthritis, but when overused, Bramlage says they can potentially do more damage than anabolics by masking injuries and forcing overexertion.

They are considered performance-enhancing drugs and outlawed in many human sports when taken intravenously. But for horses, the perceived danger is less about an unfair edge in an individual race and more about the cumulative effect of running several times in a row without enough rest.

"The anabolic steroids get more press because people can understand them easier," said Bramlage, a surgeon at Rood and Riddle Equine Hospital in Lexington. "The NFL and everybody else is involved in banning them so we don't have 400-pound offensive linemen. But the corticosteroids have more abuse potential."

The tricky part is figuring out how to regulate the bad effects without infringing on the good. Some trainers are fearful the industry will overreact.

"Now they want to take everything away," said Bob Baffert, who is sending two horses in Saturday's Run for the Roses, including morning-line favorite Lookin At Lucky. "These horses have got pretty tough testing. It's been like that for a long time, but people want to change a lot of things. They make a bigger deal out of it than it really is."

In 2006, two years before imposing the sweeping ban on anabolic steroids that is now standard at virtually every thoroughbred track in the country, Kentucky racing officials rewrote their drug rules. The changes included new guidelines on six of the dozens of types of corticosteroids, telling trainers exactly how many days before a race they should stop giving their horses certain anti-inflammatory drugs to avoid a steroid violation. Although high levels of those corticosteroids can still spark penalties, they are a slap on the wrist compared to the consequences if anabolics are found in a horse's bloodstream. A positive test for anabolic steroids usually results in disqualification, loss of purse, a hefty fine and a likely suspension for the trainer. If a horse tests positive for too much of a corticosteroid, there might be a modest fine but likely no suspension or forfeiture unless stewards find clear evidence to prove the violation was flagrant or intentional.

Racing took steps to eliminate anabolic steroids amid a national outcry against performance-enhancing drugs being used to inflate home run records or sprint times. But Travis Tygart, CEO of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, said instances of cheating through corticosteroids are relatively rare in human sports, except as part of a training regimen that also includes anabolics.

"We see less of those in doping situations than athletes who are cheating with hard-core performance enhancers," Tygart said. "They're in a separate category where they're not in and of themselves the hard-core cheating substances, though they certainly can provide a benefit."

The Racing Medication and Testing Consortium, an industry group that advised on writing the rules for anabolic steroids now accepted across the country, has been researching guidelines for corticosteroids. Kentucky and many other racing states are waiting for that research before tightening their rules on the drugs.

"It's kind of a situation where you're not trying to throw the baby out with the bath water," said Scot Waterman, RMTC's executive director.

Anabolic steroid testing swept into the sport as one of many safety enhancements after the 2008 Kentucky Derby, where the filly Eight Belles pulled up lame jogging past the finish and had to be euthanized with two fractured ankles.

With speculation swirling the muscular horse was using steroids during her second-place run, trainer Larry Jones called for not just the regular necropsy but a more sophisticated one that included a drug test that proved she was clear.

Later, Rick Dutrow, trainer of the Derby winner Big Brown, acknowledged he regularly injected the horse with the then-legal steroid stanozolol, sold under the brand name Winstrol.

Kentucky has since banned the drug, and Dutrow says the current testing probably goes too far, let alone expanded testing.

"I thought it was a good thing," Dutrow said. "I thought it helped the horses. It brightened their coat. It gave them incentive to eat if they needed to. They were happy horses. I did not see an issue."

Mary Scollay, Kentucky's equine medical director, said abolishing anabolic steroids from the sport was the right thing to do — even if questions linger on what to do with corticosteroids.

"That was much more black and white," Scollay said. "The corticosteroids have a tremendous gray area."

Trainer Todd Pletcher, who is sending out four horses in this year's Derby including Devil May Care, the first filly to run since Eight Belles, acknowledged officials have a tough call to make on how best to regulate the drugs.

"It's a delicate balancing act," Pletcher said. "Some science is good. Some medication is good. I think there's a misconception everyone's trying to create an edge or do something illegal. That's not what we're doing here. We're trying to keep the horse healthy."

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