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The advertisement features a screenshot of a 'HYPOTHETICAL Mating Report' from TrueNicks, showing a grid of data for various stallions and broodmares. The report includes columns for stallion names, broodmare names, and various performance metrics. The TrueNicks logo is prominently displayed on the right side of the ad.

Officials: New Alliance Means Business

by Tom LaMarra

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Officials indicated Dec. 11 the push for equine safety and racing industry integrity is serious business, and they called on stakeholders to support the plan.

Discussion of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association Safety and Integrity Alliance, launched in October, wrapped up this year's University of Arizona Symposium on Racing and Gaming in Tucson. The alliance figures to be front and center during the 2009 symposium given its priority among industry leaders.

The alliance was formed not to make policy but to implement it and ensure compliance with various reforms. The main points of focus are medication and drug-testing, injury reporting and prevention, safety research, overall safety in horse racing, and aftercare for retired racehorses.

The alliance also could lead to creation of a Self-Regulatory

Organization to oversee compliance and standards.

"It will be totally transparent, and we will hold all constituents accountable," said Bob Elliston, executive chairman of the NTRA. "There is nobody that's going to be left out of this alliance. We will hold people's feet to the fire."

All the major racing associations and horsemen's groups have signed on, at least initially. The accreditation process, which will rate members from "best-in-class to the ordinary," Elliston said, will play out during 2009. The NTRA is funding alliance operations, but stakeholders will pay the cost of reforms.

Tom Ludt, who chairs the Thoroughbred Action Committee formed by the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association, said TOBA is focusing on a state-by-state grassroots campaign to lobby regulators in racing states to adopt reforms as soon as possible. He acknowledged it won't happen overnight, but the process must be started.

"We need to have progress, not perfection," said Ludt, a member of the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission. "We have to have people who have the passion to commit, stay the course, and be held accountable."

Dan Fick, executive director of The Jockey Club, which is heading up other safety initiatives, said the regulators need help from the industry in getting safety and integrity reforms on the books.

"We need to help these people," Fick said. "We need to organization on a grassroots level. We don't have a problem organizing on a grassroots level when we want to get slot machines. This is a critical time in our industry but also an opportunity to step forward and show what we can do."

Though there is a sense of urgency, several reforms—regulation of anabolic steroids on race day and a ban on toe grabs, for instance—have been in the works for years. In 2008, however, the industry was thrown a curve with the high-profile breakdown of the filly Eight Belles in May and a June congressional hearing that didn't present the industry in a favorable light.

The threat of federal intervention has fueled cooperation among industry factions. The NTRA hired former Wisconsin governor and federal cabinet secretary Tommy Thompson to oversee the compliance and accreditation aspects of the Safety and Integrity Alliance.

Regular updates will be provided on those associations that are in compliance and those that are not. And the public will be informed.

“It will be the right business decision for me to implement the (safety and integrity) recommendations,” said Elliston, president of Turfway Park in Kentucky. “The betting public will follow accreditation (of members) and vote with their wallet.”

The NTRA this summer released survey results that showed even core fans of horse racing believe the industry has lost credibility and needs to make improvements to ensure equine health and safety, as well as wagering integrity.

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