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## Arthur: Calif. Equine Deaths Declined in '09

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Equine fatalities in California held steady during the 2008-09 fiscal year, although Thoroughbred deaths at the state's racetracks decreased by more than 10% over the preceding year, data released during the week of Feb. 22 revealed.

According to figures provided by Dr. Rick Arthur, the California Horse Racing Board's equine medical director, Thoroughbred deaths at state racetrack enclosures dropped from 259 in 2008 to 232 this past year, based on the full calendar year's reporting, rather than the fiscal year. Thoroughbred fatalities were down by nearly 15% from its peak number of 272 in 2005, Arthur reported, prior to the CHRHB requiring mandatory installation of synthetic tracks at its major tracks. That mandate, issued in 2006, took effect at the beginning of 2007.

Overall, the number of deaths reported for all breeds in fiscal year 2008-09 was 320, a decline of five compared to the preceding year, according to the CHRHB annual report. However, last year's total for all breeds was 8.8% higher than in fiscal year 2006-07 and "substantially greater" than when the necropsy evaluation program began in 1990, the postmortem report states.

Charts and information on racehorse deaths in 2009 are included in a pair of newly released documents, the CHRHB's annual report and its Postmortem Examination Program report. (Both are available on the regulatory agency's Web site, [www.chrb.ca.gov](http://www.chrb.ca.gov).)

Arthur's data, separate from the other two reports, shows a decline each year in Thoroughbred deaths since 2005. He also reports figures, based on fatalities per 1,000 starts from 2004 through 2009, that reflect a slower rate of catastrophic injuries to horses racing on synthetic tracks as compared to dirt at Del Mar, Golden Gate Fields, Hollywood Park, and Santa Anita.

Synthetic surfaces produced a mortality rate of 1.95 per 1,000 (109 out of 56,031 starters) from 2007-09, while the rate over the same tracks when they raced on dirt (2004-06) was 3.09 (181/58,659), according to Arthur. For comparison, the racing fatality rate on turf for the entire period was 2.44 (89/36,486).

The latest figures are likely to intensify the debate over the worthiness of synthetic tracks, which were mandated by the board following a 40% spike in fatalities from 2004 to 2005.

"People forget that this was a major impetus for mandating synthetic tracks," Arthur said of the increase from 243 horse deaths to 320 over those two years. "Even though they haven't been as successful as we hoped, I give the horse racing board a lot of credit for taking a step they felt was necessary to save horses' lives. It turns out that, maybe, it wasn't as well thought-out as it might have been."

Controversy over safety and maintenance requirements has been practically non-stop since the new surfaces were installed, with Santa Anita becoming the first track to publicly announce it would replace its synthetic surface later this year due to drainage problems in rainy weather.

John Sadler, new president of the California Thoroughbred Trainers, recently told the CHRHB that 70% of his organization favors the removal of the Pro-Ride surface there and replacing it with a natural dirt surface. Arthur, though, said he had seen a group of trainers passing around a petition urging track administration to keep the synthetic surface.

Arthur said Santa Anita had its third synthetic track fatality in the nine-week-old meet during training hours Feb. 25, which he said was "remarkable" when one considers that there have been 8,000 to 10,000 workouts during the meet. (It was initially reported that the workout fatality on Feb. 25 was the first of the meet on the main track, which Arthur said was incorrect. There have been no fatalities on the main track during racing at Santa Anita so far this season.)

"When synthetic tracks are in good condition and the materials are right, they are very, very good," Arthur said.

"The problem is keeping them right. Santa Anita has taken the position that the track's superintendent, Richard Tedesco, should be in charge of the track's maintenance, and he has done a very good job."

At the four major tracks, fatalities on synthetic tracks for both racing and training increased from 107 to 117 over the past two fiscal years, according to the CHRB annual report. Arthur said the increase can be attributed to Golden Gate Fields, which is racing far more dates since the demolition of Bay Meadows and had problems with its Tapeta main track composition during the fall of 2008. Golden Gate recorded 28 synthetic track deaths in 2007-08 and 44 in 2008-09.

Of the overall total of 320 in 2008-09, 91 deaths were attributable to non-racing or training causes, such as gastrointestinal diseases (colic, colitis and enteritis), respiratory (primarily pneumonia and related illness), neurological disease (such as West Nile Virus) and EPM (equine protozoal myeloencephalitis).

There were 105 deaths resulting from injuries on dirt tracks (78 racing, 27 training) in 2008-09, and seven on turf (all in races).

Excluding non-exercise causes of fatalities for the year, Los Alamitos, which races both Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds, had 73 fatalities on its dirt track, with 67 of them resulting from injuries sustained during racing. Golden Gate totaled 45 (44 synthetic, one turf), Hollywood Park 38 (35 synthetic, two turf, one training track dirt), Santa Anita 33 (27 synthetic, two turf, four training track dirt) and Del Mar 11 (all synthetic), according to the CHRB annual report.

Thoroughbred deaths in 2008-09 accounted for 71.9% of the total, according to the postmortem report, with Quarter Horses at 24.4%, which was a 34.5% percent jump over the previous year. There were five Standardbred fatalities and seven from other breeds, which race mostly during the Northern California fair season.

The postmortem report found that 74.4% of the racing or training deaths were primarily caused by musculoskeletal problems, with 91.9% of those affecting front or rear legs.

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