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Officials: Track Consistency, Maintenance Key

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As people rush to take sides in the great dirt-versus-synthetic racetrack surface debate, Dr. Mick Peterson and Santa Anita Park track superintendent Richard Tedesco suggested consistency and maintenance trump type of surface.

Injuries to horses can be reduced on dirt and synthetic surfaces, they said, if tracks can use data to assess their surfaces and keep them consistent through weather changes and amount of traffic.

Peterson and Tedesco spoke to a group of owners and breeders at the "Modern Veterinary Medicine & Your Racehorse" seminar in Southern California in March 14. Dr. Greg Ferraro of the University of California-Davis Center for Equine Health moderated the session, sponsored by the Thoroughbred Owners of California, California Thoroughbred Foundation, and Southern California Equine Foundation.

When asked which surface he would prefer—dirt or synthetic—for horse safety, Tedesco said he might prefer the "ultimate dirt track," but he's not sure one exists. Tedesco for years worked on dirt surfaces and has overseen the evolution of Santa Anita's synthetic surface.

"I've had to deal with three different surfaces here," Tedesco said, "starting with a Cushion Track, then an addition of Pro-Ride. Then we went into as much Pro-Ride as we could."

Tedesco said a breakdown in the first race March 13 was the first "catastrophic accident" in a race at Santa Anita since the current meet began Dec. 26.

"At this point, I've got one of the safest racetracks I've ever worked with," Tedesco said. He called the Santa Anita main track "almost a hybrid dirt track" because the polymer content is very low, though it still has fibers in it.

Tedesco said he has experienced great dirt racetracks. But he pointed out how dirt surfaces change when they are sealed in rain and opened back up when the weather improves. Racehorses, he explained, need consistency in racing surface.

Peterson, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Maine, is also the executive director of the Racing Surfaces Testing Laboratory. He showed the audience some of the methods the RSTL developed to measure racetrack surfaces so track superintendents such as Tedesco have more information to make their tracks consistent.

While moisture can radically change a dirt surface, temperature is the key to synthetic surfaces, Peterson said. He cited research on two different synthetic tracks; one would change dramatically when the temperature hit 100 degrees, while the other showed more gradual change over a wider temperature change.

Maintenance personnel at each track would have to use different methods, Peterson said. The first track would need water quickly when the temperature reached 90 degrees to cool it down before the change occurred.

Ferraro complimented Peterson's work and said: "But we're five to seven years too late. We should have started all this monitoring before we started changing all the tracks."

Peterson and Ferraro touched on data being collected to study injury rates on dirt versus synthetic surfaces. They referenced numbers cited by Dr. Rick Arthur, equine medical director for the California Horse Racing Board, that indicate a reduction in catastrophic breakdowns on synthetic tracks.

Ferraro said the industry does not yet have data on injuries that aren't catastrophic, though several such studies are under way. Injury rates in the mornings were low at first on synthetic tracks, Ferraro said, but are creeping up.

"They're working the horses more and further and faster," Ferraro said. "So a lot of the injury rates rising in the morning are probably due to that. Also, as soon as you put these synthetics in, you need to change the kind of shoes you use. You can't use any kind of traction devices at all."

Ferraro said synthetic tracks seem to mask a horse's soreness. He suggested jogging a horse on a dirt shedrow to check for soreness after the horse has trained.

"You have a tendency to think the horse is doing better than he actually is on synthetics," Ferraro said. "And combining synthetics with (non-steroidal medication) is a lethal combination. That tends to make you think your horse is better than he is, and they get hurt."

The RSTL is working to collect data from racetracks and correlate it with injury rates. Such information will allow maintenance personnel to make the best decisions for each situation.

In the case of synthetic tracks, Peterson noted the wax and polymers used in them will change over time, as will the length of the fibers as they break down from use. The sand in various areas of the track also wears differently. That finding is prompting Arlington Park and Keeneland to occasionally switch the inside half of the track with the outside half, something Peterson likened to rotating tires.

Yet Peterson said dirt tracks also change dramatically, though for different reasons, many weather-related.

"One of the biggest challenges with a dirt track is that you can design a dirt track for a particular moisture content," Peterson said, "but you can't do it for all moisture contents. If it's dry every day, you can do a good dirt track. If it's wet every day, you can do a good dirt track."

The RSTL's goal is for any racetrack—dirt or synthetic—to be able to maintain the safest and most consistent surface despite other variables, such as weather.

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