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## CHRB Launches Synthetic Track Study

by Jack Shinar

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The Pro-Ride surface at Santa Anita, and the other artificial surfaces in California, will be studied by the California Horse Racing Board.

Photo: Benoit

Love them or hate them, one of the main concerns about synthetic tracks is how to determine if they are doing what they were intended for -- provide a safe, consistent racing surface.

In California, where four major racetracks use different brands of synthetic surfaces, the issue of safety has become paramount. Problems, especially at Del Mar and Santa Anita, during the past two years have become central issues for racing in the state.

Do the tracks drain water adequately? Can they handle the sort of demands required for full time racing and training? What are the effects of heat exposure and age? Are synthetic surfaces really safer than standard dirt tracks?

In an attempt to get answers, the California Horse Racing Board, which mandated synthetic surfaces for its major racetracks in 2007, is moving ahead on a couple of fronts -- a safety standards pilot study and a national effort to pull together "data gathering systems" from various sources examining horse injuries, bio-mechanics and other factors.

Kirk Breed, executive director of the CHRB, and Dr. Rick Arthur, the agency's equine medical director, discussed plans with the board during its meeting Jan. 15 at Santa Anita.

Breed told commissioners that the board is required by law to establish and monitor safety standards for all racing surfaces.

"The plan is to have a team to collect data on a daily basis," Breed said of the pilot study, which he said would involve CHRB investigative staff, track stewards and racetrack maintenance personnel. He said the collection has already started.

"The idea is to find out what the tracks are doing throughout the year," Breed said.

A soils scientist/engineer, working with veterinarians and in cooperation with horsemen and racing associations, will test the racing surfaces. Synthesizing the results with current research and studies of tracks in other jurisdictions, standards that can be measured and compared would be developed.

A track steward in charge of safety would be responsible for seeing that the standards, once developed, are enforced.

According to a staff report, the pilot study will address areas of concern such as permeability, absorption of impact at various temperatures, and the effects of climate change and organic contamination.

"To this end, samples of constituent materials, in particular wax or polymer and sand, will be submitted as part of the test plot construction," the report said. "This test can help manufacturers provide quality control to ensure that the track mixture has the intended composition at all locations."

Arthur told the board that the development of a national equine injury database through the Grayson Jockey Club Research Foundation is "moving along quite well." The database, along with other information gathering techniques, will make it possible to correlate a number of variable factors into the causes of infirmities, he said.

He said that tracking work patterns and such routine veterinarian procedures as x-rays, ultrasounds and surgeries can help

determine how well the tracks are performing.

"The bottom line is we haven't had the objective data that we need," Arthur said.

In answer to a question, Arthur said that data as of July 1, 2008, showed a decrease in fatal breakdowns at synthetic racetracks but that the injury rate is less conclusive.

"We are experiencing a 3 to 4 percent attrition rate each month" of horses that are taken out of training, he said, which translates to a cost of \$100 million per month to replace horse flesh.

Arthur said the analysis of synthetic racetracks is "greatly complicated" by the composition of the individual surfaces.

"Not only are they different when they are just installed, but the temporal differences (how they handle changes in temperature) are much greater than anyone anticipated," he said.

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