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Keeneland said to be a shining example of an improving Kentucky track

By Jennie Rees • jrees@courier-journal.com • April 26, 2010

LEXINGTON, Ky. — When asked to interview for the job as president of the Keeneland Association, Nick Nicholson said he focused on a lot of positives and one negative about the position.

The negative? "There's a life-and-death element to this, and how could I sleep at night if, God forbid, somebody died or was seriously hurt?" he recalled.

But he took the job, ultimately deciding, "If we're doing everything we humanly know to do, then that's the way you sleep."

Terry Meyocks, national manager of the Jockeys' Guild, cites Keeneland as a shining example of a track pulling out all the stops to make an inherently dangerous sport safer.

Keeneland was a leader in using high-tech materials to pad all the hard surfaces that can touch a human or horse in the starting gate.

The track hired Dr. Barry Schumer as one of the few track medical directors nationally and the only one in Kentucky.

Schumer worked with The Jockey Club — the powerful industry organization that oversees everything from breed registration to data-keeping — to develop the much-praised Jockey Health Information System. The online database makes jockeys' medical records immediately available to medical personnel at participating tracks in the event of injury. Jockeys were required to register before they could ride a race at Keeneland this past meet.

Though other hospitals are closer, Keeneland made the University of Kentucky's A.B. Chandler Hospital the go-to site for serious jockey injuries because it is a Level One trauma center and has a major research program in brain and spinal-cord injuries.

But while Keeneland is credited as an industry leader in jockey safety, there are other efforts elsewhere in Kentucky. For example:

Meyocks has been working with Lexington's Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital, a comprehensive rehab center owned by the Kentucky Easter Seal Society, to establish it as a national rehab center for jockeys with debilitating injuries — an idea welcomed by researchers based there through UK's neuro-rehabilitation research program.

The Kentucky Horse Racing Commission has created a safety and welfare committee and last year began requiring that everyone on a horse at a track wear a helmet that meets upgraded minimum standards. A rule mandating similarly

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upgraded safety vests (similar to flak jackets) for anyone on a horse or working on the starting gate is scheduled to go into effect May 15.

Executive director Lisa Underwood said the commission's staff is looking at medical protocols for both horses and people at the state's thoroughbred and harness tracks to make sure the best possible practices are being used.

Churchill Downs Inc. last year launched a "Safety from Start to Finish" campaign that it says will cost \$1million a year.

Even before the state edict, Churchill required more rigorously tested helmets and safety vests.

"Where we are now is a much better place than 10, 15, 20 years ago in terms of recognizing the inherent dangers and doing everything possible to diminish the risk," Churchill spokesman John Asher said.

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