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Horse industry rush to synthetic racetracks stalls

By Gregory A. Hall • ghall@courier-journal.com • April 26, 2010

When first installed for thoroughbred racing almost five years ago at Turfway Park in Florence, Ky., synthetic surfaces were hailed as a potential panacea for a sport sullied by fatal injuries suffered by high-profile horses.

In the first three years, nine tracks installed the mix of rubber, sand fiber and wax, which promised not only safer racing but a drainage system that would allow tracks always to be fast; elimination of dirt kickback as horses ran; and only minimal maintenance.

The momentum was such that Tom Meeker, then the retiring president of Churchill Downs Inc., suggested the Derby might one day be run on a synthetic surface because, "I just think it'll be the standard in the industry."

But it hasn't been so simple.

While still considered by many to be safer for horses, synthetic surfaces haven't been installed in any North American track since the initial wave, and one track — Santa Anita in California — has even considered returning to dirt.

The problem is that the early promises of minimal maintenance have proved to be a little too rosy, and the cost of \$6 million to \$10 million

for tearing out dirt and replacing it with the artificial surface can be prohibitive.

Meanwhile, some argue that dirt tracks could be just as safe as artificial, if tended properly — and that synthetics just don't hold up as well as originally hoped.

"With the intensity of use in American racing, I just don't think that they stand up particularly well to the wear and tear that our tracks get," said Rick Arthur, veterinarian and equine medical director for the California Horse Racing Board

But Keeneland Race Course President Nick Nicholson, whose company sells the Polytrack brand of surface, says that no matter your view, it's clear the debate has improved equine safety — even at dirt tracks.

"I think personally that we were on automatic pilot with dirt surfaces for too many years," he said, adding that since the synthetics were introduced, more racetracks with dirt surfaces have placed a greater emphasis on safety and maintenance.

Tracks' breakdowns decline

Nicholson credits the switch to Polytrack in fall 2006 for reducing fatal horse breakdowns at Keeneland, which he concedes had a higher-than-average fatality rate on its dirt track.

At the start of the spring meet that ended Friday,

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its rate was 1.04 fatalities per 1,000 starts, according to the track's recordkeeping.

And California reports that its four major thoroughbred tracks saw fatality rates drop to 1.95 horses per 1,000 starts after synthetic surfaces were required to be installed by the end of 2007, compared with a rate of 3.09 on dirt.

A new national injury database showed 2.04 fatal injuries per 1,000 starts for the 12 months ending Nov. 1, 2009 — but there has been no analysis released to show which surfaces were involved in the breakdowns.

More detailed analysis of the database and the races where breakdowns occur is expected during an industry summit scheduled at Keeneland in June.

In the meantime, Nicholson defends the maintenance of Polytrack as requiring fewer hours than dirt and said he never suggested the surface was maintenance free.

Dirt surfaces are dried by packing them down — often by dragging weighted boards behind a tractor — so that water rolls off to the inside rail, where drains are located.

Synthetic surfaces use a porous, asphalt-like macadam with drainage pipes underneath. The synthetic running surface is placed over the macadam, allowing rain to run through the surface into the drainage system, avoiding the water buildup that is common in traditional dirt tracks.

At Turfway, racing on a dirt track during its wintertime meet often had to be canceled because the dirt would freeze and thaw unevenly. Its Polytrack surface cut down on the cancellations — in the last three winter/spring meetings on dirt, the track averaged 12.67 days with at least one race canceled. Since Polytrack, the average is 5.2 days per winter meet.

The makeup of the surface, however, had to be

reworked to deal with complaints of the material clumping or balling up in horses' hooves. Also, running horses were kicking up more of the material into the trailing horses and their jockeys than expected.

Owners and trainers appreciate the reduction in cancellations at Turfway, but "we have our issues with it," said Marty Maline, executive director of the Kentucky Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, including complaints about the depth of the track changing after it's tilled.

University of Maine engineering professor Mick Peterson, who specializes in racing surfaces and consults with tracks, including Churchill, said the synthetic track materials do seem to break down in North America faster than originally thought.

Previous experience with the artificial material had been in England, he said, where weather fluctuations are less extreme and fewer races are run.

But there are ways to deal with that, he said, citing a process that Churchill-owned Arlington Park, near Chicago, uses — periodically moving Polytrack material from the outside part of the track to the inside and churning both to bring up

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material from the bottom.

"It's like rotating your tires," Peterson said. "I think that's a real promising protocol."

But at Santa Anita in California, where the state Horse Racing Board required its major tracks to convert to synthetic surfaces three years ago, the surface still has problems.

Santa Anita initially installed a Cushion Track synthetic surface but later replaced it with another brand, Pro-Ride.

Two Breeders' Cups were held there with without incident, but there were cancellations this winter as heavy rains led to clogged drainage areas and soggy spots.

"The primary issue with that surface from the very beginning was the choice of sand," Peterson said, although he noted that the track's safety record remains very good.

Even so, the winter cancellations led Santa Anita officials to announce plans to replace the current surface this summer and possibly restore it to dirt, assuming the California board allowed it. Frank Stronach, the chairman of the track's parent company, later quashed those plans. Asked why, he gave no specific answer, beyond complaining about track regulation throughout the industry.

But the new board of the California Thoroughbred Trainers also wants the state to return to dirt racing.

"I think there's a place for them in bad weather but not for southern California," three-time Derby winning trainer Bob Baffert said of synthetic tracks. "We don't get that kind of bad weather."

Safety paramount

Peterson said he expects the deciding factor will ultimately be safety.

"This is an industry that can't afford to have catastrophic injuries on the front page of the paper," he said.

But Baffert noted the safety of dirt surfaces could be improved with better maintenance. California's dirt tracks "were in such poor condition," he said. "They hadn't been redone since Seabiscuit."

And, he said, synthetics cause different types of horse injuries, like soft-tissue damage. "I don't need a study," he said. "I have my own study going on every day because this is what I do for a living."

Some jockeys also are worried that the synthetic surfaces may be harder on their bodies in a spill.

Two jockeys in separate accidents last year at Arlington Park, and another at Keeneland last fall, suffered at least temporary paralysis — all on Polytrack.

A synthetic surface lacks a "bounce to it," longtime jockey Willie Martinez said. "It's kind of a concern."

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Nicholson said he believes Keeneland's Polytrack has helped reduce the number of falls and reduce the number of broken bones. He had hoped it would be an overall "better place to fall" but is not completely confident about that, and awaits more study.

Yet more generally, Nicholson said he doesn't like to see the issue portrayed as dirt vs. synthetic. He believes the future has a place for both.

"I've never been anti-dirt," he said. "I don't think Saratoga should change. I don't think the Kentucky Derby should change."

The goal, he said, should be simply to make racing safer for horses and riders at every track.

"The rider and horse safety question is one where there's no final victory," he said. "Wherever you are, you want to be better."

Reporter Gregory A. Hall can be reached at (502) 582-4087.

- 2006:** Hollywood Park - Cushion Track
- 2007:** Arlington Park - Polytrack
- 2007:** Del Mar - Polytrack
- 2007:** Presque Isle Downs - Tapeta
- 2007:** Santa Anita Park - Pro-Ride (initially Cushion Track)
- 2007:** Golden Gate Fields - Tapeta



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