

Medications need to be cleaned up

Allowing steroid use in racehorses tarnishes the sport's reputation

by Mark Simon

A LOT of people say racing needs to spend much of its efforts eliminating illegal medications from the sport. Here is a better idea: Racing needs to eliminate legal medications from the sport.

What is illegal in racing is not—or should not be—the problem. Illegal drugs should be discovered in pre- and post-race tests and the offenders

summarily punished. The challenge is to develop the tests that can identify all the illegal drugs in use.

The real, palpable problem facing racing today—as has been so publicly pointed out since early May by racing fans, animal rights activists, and United States Congressmen and women—is legal medications, and the negative public perception of racing that comes with their use in racehorses. And a second, and equally

critical, issue regarding legal medications is their long-term effect on the breed and whether they are responsible for the inherent unsoundness of Thoroughbreds today.

So, where do you start to fix this problem?

First, is to admit there is a problem. So admit it: Racing has a problem. And the problem is self-inflicted. As Pogo said in his comic strip: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

The legal medications that are hurting the sport, from both a public perception standpoint and to-be-determined soundness of the breed standpoint, are steroids, Salix, and Butazolidin. In the majority of racing states, steroids are legal, as are the anti-bleeding medication Salix and the anti-inflammatory Bute.

If you were to draw a chart of the average number of starts by year per horse that begins in 1970—essen-

tially when permissive medications started to be legalized by some states—and overlay that with the legalization of Salix and Bute in states nationally, you would see a steady decline in the average number of starts that coincides with the legalization of permissive medications. Where racehorses made an average of 10.22 starts per year in 1970, horses started an average of 6.31 times in 2007.

Steroids are the principal issue of today, however, and an emotional and controversial one. The use of steroids in all sports has been decried by the American public. Most sports have banned the use of steroids, but Thoroughbred racing is behind the curve. Only 11 of the 34 states today that conduct Thoroughbred racing prohibit the administration of anabolic steroids to racehorses.

When a sport openly admits to administering steroids to its athletes—and drawing public scorn and heightened scrutiny during the Triple Crown campaign when trainer Richard Dutrow Jr. said Big Brown was routinely administered steroids—the long-term ramifications for the sport are not good.

Racing relies on the integrity of the game for its existence because gambling is at its core, and when its practitioners openly talk about using drugs on horses, it casts a negative light on the sport and all its participants.

One group that is taking action on this issue is the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission. At its July 16 meeting, a subcommittee issued a recommendation that the Kentucky Equine Drug Research Council ban the use of anabolic androgenic steroids in horses competing in pari-mutuel racing in Kentucky.

On the other side of the country a day later, the California Horse Racing Board gave final approval to reclassify anabolic steroids to Class 3 drugs, which would carry penalties resulting in purse redistribution and suspensions and/or fines for trainers with any positives. The rule most likely will be in place in time for the Breeders' Cup World Championships at Santa Anita Park at the end of October.

This is a good start. All states must follow suit.

Coincidental to the actions of the two racing commissions, sales companies also are in the process of eliminating steroid administration to horses. At the July 14-15 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky July yearling sale, the sales horses had to be free of anabolic steroids a minimum of 45 days prior to sale, and a test could be requested by the buyer to ensure the yearling was clean. Other sales companies, such as Keeneland, have implemented the same policy.

Everyone in racing—trainers, owners, breeders, consignors of horses—need to do their part in eliminating steroid use in horses. That is a crucial and essential step for the sport to clean up its image and repatriate fans.

Let's do that, and then we will turn our attention to Salix and Bute. But that is another story for another day. ☎

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