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DRF Weekend: Myths and realities of injury data

By Matt Hegarty

Data that will help answer questions about fatality rates for racehorses has been collected from U.S. racetracks since last November, but administrators of the project are probably years away from announcing any firm conclusions. That policy is the prudent scientific course to follow. But the racing industry needs to be vigilant about allowing misleading statements to creep into the breach, and that might mean using the available data to counter misinformation and to demonstrate that racing is being transparent in its efforts.

False statements about injury data have sometimes been used to support positions about synthetic racing surfaces, which have been installed at eight major racetracks in North America since 2006. One recent example involved Jess Jackson, the California winery owner who campaigns the leading candidate for Horse of the Year, 3-year-old filly Rachel Alexandra. Late in August, Jackson reiterated that he would not run Rachel Alexandra in the Breeders' Cup over the synthetic surface at Santa Anita because of his concerns about "false tracks" that "create a potential for injury."

Jackson isn't wrong when he contends that tracks in California create a potential for injury, but only because all tracks create that potential, no matter what the surface. Jackson's suggestion that artificial surfaces in California are more dangerous than traditional dirt tracks isn't just premature, it also contradicts all the available data. The preliminary data, in fact, show a 40 percent decline in fatal injuries during racing on California tracks since artificial surfaces were installed three years ago, according to California racing officials. (The same data show that training fatalities have not declined.)

Jackson's claim might have been based on reporting that accompanied a presentation made at the California Horse Racing Board meeting a week before his comments. An official who works for the CHRB's post-mortem program presented raw data about racehorse injuries in 2008, and several publications mischaracterized the presentation as an academic study that purported to show horses racing on artificial surfaces were doomed to break down catastrophically in their hind legs.

Although the preliminary data indicate an increase in hind-leg injuries, critics of artificial racing surfaces seized on the presentation to prove a hypothesis about an increase in hind-end injuries that has been making the rounds, anecdotally, at some racetracks with artificial surfaces.

Dr. Rick Arthur, the equine medical director of the California Horse Racing Board, pointed to the misunderstanding as an example of how the debate over artificial surfaces has become increasingly partisan. And it's not the only example, Arthur said. He pointed to recent comments in the media and blogosphere that characterized the Del Mar artificial surface this year as a "death track" even though the number of fatalities over the main track this year - 12 (four during racing, eight during training) - was a marked decline from the 19 over the track's last meet with a dirt main track, in 2006.

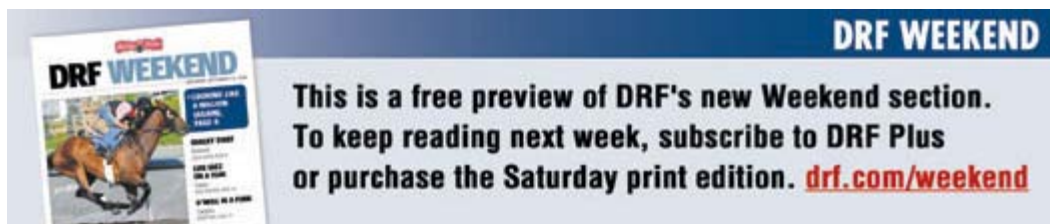
"People get pretty upset when they're told that's not the case," Arthur said. "They don't want to believe it. It's become this emotional issue, and it's become very difficult to have a dispassionate, disinterested discussion about the data. People have staked out their ground, and they will not listen to any other viewpoints."

It's also important to recognize that there are legitimate questions. The industry rushed into artificial surfaces based on data that showed a dramatic decline in injuries at Turfway Park. But the injury rates for Turfway were presented without context and without the proper scrutiny, and many supporters of artificial surfaces quickly painted critics into a corner by equating skepticism with disregard for animal safety.

It's not likely that artificial surfaces are going to be removed any time soon, and it doesn't appear as if many new artificial tracks are going to be installed. So the industry has the opportunity to do the analysis that is necessary to determine whether it should continue to invest millions of dollars into synthetic surfaces.

According to Dr. Mary Scollay, the administrator of the national effort to collect injury data, epidemiologists working for the injury-reporting database will get their first crack at a year's worth of numbers in November. Scollay said that it's highly unlikely the data will present answers of any immediate merit.

"It will likely raise new questions," Scollay said. "It's certainly not going to close the door. I personally think that's a good thing. We need to know which questions to ask, and that's how you get there, by collecting and analyzing the data."

The advertisement features a blue header with the text "DRF WEEKEND" in white. On the left is a small image of a horse racing magazine cover with the title "DRF WEEKEND" and a picture of a jockey on a horse. To the right of the image, the text reads: "This is a free preview of DRF's new Weekend section. To keep reading next week, subscribe to DRF Plus or purchase the Saturday print edition. drf.com/weekend"

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