

Columnists | Posted 9/2/2009, 5:21 pm

Raw data not the whole synthetic story

By Jay Hovdey

DEL MAR, Calif. - The first official nail in what could be the synthetic track coffin was tapped gently into place last April at Hollywood Park, when the California Horse Racing Board acknowledged that it probably could not enforce its own rule requiring a track running more than four continuous weeks of Thoroughbred sport to conduct that sport on a "polymer synthetic type" racing surface. The board agreed that future applications to run meets would be considered on a "case-by-case" basis when it came to racing surfaces.

Then, at its monthly meeting held last week, the racing board was presented with a pile of raw data, subject to broad misinterpretation, that left commissioners frustrated, the media confused, and the growing number of synthetic-track opponents with enough hammers, nails, and shovels to bury the technology for good.

Dr. Hailu Kinde of the University of California Davis, racing's Dr. Quincy, presented a preliminary version of the 2008 report from the Postmortem Examination Program of all fatalities occurring at official California racing enclosures. For the record, there were 351.

In the course of his presentation, Dr. Kinde noted that of those 351 there were 111 fatalities among Thoroughbreds while either training or racing on synthetic tracks, and of those 111, a total of 19 involved an irreparable fracture of a hind leg. In the next breath, Dr. Kinde reported that of those 351 there were 65 fatalities among Thoroughbreds either training or racing on dirt surfaces, and of those 65, exactly one involved a hind leg.

Synthetics, 19. Dirt, 1.

At this point, everyone stopped listening, which is too bad, but the red meat had been served.

"Thoroughbreds suffer a higher number of fatal injuries on synthetic surfaces compared to dirt," read the headline in the L.A. Times, topping a story that twice referred to "fatal hind rear injuries."

Here in the back row of Stats 101, we chant the familiar quote, "There are lies, damn lies, and statistics." a mantra tracing to Mark Twain, Benjamin Disraeli, and probably Moses himself. Their spirits groaned again at last week's racing board meeting.

To properly interpret Kinde's data, it would have helped to have known, (a) how many and what kind of Thoroughbreds raced on synthetics as opposed to dirt, (b) over which of the four different synthetic surfaces in California those injuries took place, and, (c) comparative totals with the 2007 postmortem report, which would have indicated whether or not (d) there was anything to be excited about in the first place.

But there it hung: Synthetics 19, Dirt, 1. Scoreboard, baby.

It is not clear why a preliminary report was presented before the final version of postmortem package of data was ready for public consumption. Those who lean toward conspiracy theories would suggest that someone's agenda was served by putting synthetic surfaces in the worst possible light, but as press leaks go, this wasn't very subtle. It was a naked, public flood.

I asked two commissioners, a member of senior staff, and Dr. Rick Arthur, the California Horse Racing Board's equine medical director, why the incomplete and potentially inflammatory postmortem data was offered, and the best answer I got was Arthur's frustrated, "There were some last-minute changes [in the report], and the presentation had been scheduled for a long time."

"You need to look at the data per start," Arthur said, citing something that was not part of last week's numbers. "Yes, there's an increase in hind-end injuries - and trainers and veterinarians have been saying that, which is important - but there is also a relative decrease in front-end injuries."

The most damaging byproduct of the synthetic-surface debate is the fact that the subject of surfaces crowds out rational consideration of all the other factors that contribute to breakdowns and fatalities. The racetracks and racing board backed themselves into this corner, though, by allowing synthetic surfaces to be advertised as safer than dirt. This was asking for trouble. Fatalities raise red flags, and now practically every fatality would be somehow connected to racing surface, no matter what the mitigating circumstances.

There was, at the outset of California's synthetic era, a vocal opposition to the change from dirt tracks, but their voices tended to be muted by a broad consensus of synthetic technology support among the groups speaking for owners, trainers, and even jockeys. (I predicted, tongue only halfway in cheek, that the EPA would shut down the whole thing because of environmental contamination.)

Then came a series of calamities, from Santa Anita's failed Cushion Track and conversion to the chemically heightened Pro-Ride, to Hollywood's irregular and deteriorating Cushion Track surfaces, to Del Mar's three different manifestations of Polytrack over the past three summers. (Interestingly, there have been relatively few complaints about the Tapeta surface at Golden Gate.)

Little wonder, though, that some horsemen who were so excited about the prospects of safer, more consistent main track surfaces are now feeling betrayed.

"You might as well be talking about abortion or gun control when you're talking about synthetic surfaces," Arthur added. "There is no way you can get intelligent, disinterested conversation. People have staked their ground, and it's become an emotional issue."

John Harris, the racing board's chairman, was the board's vice-chairman in May of 2006, when the synthetic mandate was adopted. On that occasion he said, "It is so critical that racing not be viewed as a sport that leads to unnecessary death of our participants."

As an operating principal, Harris got it right. But in dishing out misleading data last week, his board got it wrong, and only served to undermine efforts to go forward in a responsible manner.

Copyright © 2007 Daily Racing Form, LLC. All rights reserved.