

Santa Anita | Posted 3/1/2010, 5:45 pm

## Stronach: No surface change

By Brad Free

ARCADIA, Calif. - In a reversal of a January announcement that the Pro-Ride surface would be replaced at the conclusion of the winter meet, Santa Anita will keep the surface in place for the time being, Frank Stronach, the chairman of the two companies that control the track, said on Sunday.

Stronach said that to replace the main track under current conditions would be "throwing money down in an open pit" unless he were allowed to run the track with less regulation from the state.

Under current business conditions, Stronach said, he is not willing to approve a track surface project estimated to cost \$8 million to \$10 million.



Benoit & Associates

*Magna head Frank Stronach said that under current conditions, he is not willing to approve a Santa Anita track surface project estimated to cost \$8 million to \$10 million.*

"I'm not going to put money in, if I see the whole structure does not work," Stronach said.

Where Stronach would find the money for such a project is unclear given ongoing bankruptcy proceedings by Santa Anita's owner, Magna Entertainment Corp. Magna filed for bankruptcy in March 2009. MI Developments, the largest creditor of Magna, will take possession of Santa Anita. The matter is not expected to be resolved until after the winter meet ends on April 18.

In the meantime, Stronach links two issues - the synthetic surface and his contention that racing in California is stifled by overregulation. Stronach proposes a reduced level of government involvement, in addition to an undefined "racing charter" in which the track and horsemen are partners.

Stronach framed his vague remarks Sunday around a theme of "free enterprise." He implied that California tracks should be allowed to compete against each other for business, rather than the state awarding specific dates when they can operate.

"Let us open up our store when we think we get the most customers," Stronach said. "Let the market decide . . . whoever is going to put on a better show will get the greatest market."

The California Horse Racing Board awards dates to the state's racetracks. Any movement to open the market could be met with resistance from other tracks.

"So what?" Stronach said. "We're saying, you can race when you want to race. Are you afraid to compete?"

Beyond wanting a reduction in government involvement, Stronach still bristles at the state racing board mandate that the major California racetracks install a synthetic surface by the end of 2007. Stronach said he has spent approximately \$24 million on synthetic surfaces following the mandate. The surfaces have not met expectations, with drainage issues leading to the cancellation of four racing days during the current meet, and 11 days during the 2007-2008 meet.

"I don't like [synthetic surfaces], I never liked it, but I got legislated by the government to put it in,"

Stronach said.

Although the racing board has backed away from its directive, Stronach said that unless his desired changes occur, then Pro-Ride will remain.

"If that doesn't happen, you'll be racing on this thing, yes," Stronach said.

Stronach did not address the bankruptcy issue, and he remained in California on Monday to meet with horsemen's groups.

It is unclear how Stronach plans to achieve a reduced role of government regulation, although he said he would like to partner with horsemen in a "racing charter."

"I hope that the horsemen can be very much involved to bring about change," he said. "They have to drive it. There are a lot of rich horsemen out there. If you really want to have horse racing, get involved."

Asked if he will ask horsemen to contribute to the cost of a replacement surface, Stronach replied, "I did not say that. I'm saying, there is no new thing here until we get a strong indication that the government is committed to free enterprise, and that the horsemen are committed to free enterprise."

Stronach, a breeder and owner, does not campaign his horses in California, other than Mast Track, who is expected to run Saturday in the Santa Anita Handicap. Stronach, who has a home in Canada, was asked why he does not race in California.

"First of all, it's a long way out here," he said.

He also is not satisfied with the surface, and said he stopped racing in California after the synthetic surface mandate.

"I would have horses out here if it's free enterprise," he said. "Free enterprise means I would have a different racing surface to attract horse owners."

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