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## Study shows no turf edge on synthetics

By Jeremy Plonk  
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It's time to separate the facts and the friction.

If you choose to be emotionally charged and mindless in your evaluation of all-weather surfaces in horse racing, just stop reading now. If you want to be constructive in the factual debate, and maybe even improve yourself as a handicapper and fan, then I think you'll be quite surprised at what you're about to read.

After a study of more than 7,300 all-weather surface starters from 60 of the most well-known barns throughout North America, I have found absolutely no factual proof that horses who move from turf racing to all-weather surface racing are any better off than those who switch from the dirt.

You want a freaky stat? Try this one on.

These 60 barns produced 668 winners from 3,887 starters when moving from dirt to all-weather surface races. That's 17.2 percent victories.

Those same 60 barns produced 591 winners from 3,443 starters when moving from turf to an all-weather surface. Survey says: 17.2 percent.

The stables sampled include all the big names you know and love, from Baffert and Asmussen to McGaughey and McPeck -- all of their starters, at all racetracks. Top horsemen from all regions of the country were included, especially those where all-weather surfaces are in play such as Kentucky, Illinois and California.

Whether you look at this anecdotally or in total, the findings fly in the face of an overwhelming miscast perception of all-weather surfaces. You can't hear two horsemen or fans talk without one of them (or both) bemoaning how turfy the all-weather tracks play.

Heaven forbid, we've already written off the 2009 Breeders' Cup to a parade of lawnmowers, no matter from what division or surface they might reside. Some aren't even bothering to show up because they're so certain the surface is "brown turf."

Want some fun facts I guarantee you won't believe? Try these:

1. Turf legend and Hall of Fame trainer Bill Mott has won 20 percent of his races going dirt-to-synthetic compared to only 13 percent when moving from turf-to-synthetic.
2. Another phenomenal Hall of Fame turf trainer, Jonathan Sheppard, has won an incredible 47 percent of his surface switches to the all-weather track ... with DIRT horses. He's merely mortal at 24 percent when moving a turf runner to the all-weather.
3. Todd Pletcher has won 19 percent of the time going dirt-to-synthetic, but only 14 percent when shifting turf-to-synthetic. Yet he's been one of the more vocal critics of his dirt horses not liking the all-weather tracks.
4. Veteran trainer, and a grass maven for most of his career, Barclay Tagg, has never won an all-weather surface race while moving a horse from the turf. If it was so easy, Barclay would have the book on it.

Among the 60 trainers studied, no doubt some showed more of a propensity to transfer their turf horses to the all-

weather surfaces. Graham Motion (24 percent turf vs. 17 percent dirt) was among the stronger turf-to-synthetic conditioners, as was Shug McGaughey (27 percent turf vs. 14 percent dirt), Ian Wilkes (26-18), Mac Robertson (31-10), Ted West (29-12), Scott Lake (29-16) and Patrick Biancone (28-19).

Of the 60 trainers surveyed, in terms of winning percentages:

- 19 scored within 2 percentage points with either surface switch.
- 22 were 3 or more percentage points better with dirt-to-synthetic moves.
- 19 were 3 or more percentage points better with turf-to-synthetic moves.

That's about as even-Steven as I can call it, folks. Heck, guys like Dale Romans, David Hofmans, Vladimir Cerin and Bret Calhoun know what I'm talking about. Or at least they should if they're keeping track of what's working for them. All of those top horsemen have the exact same win rates moving horses from dirt-to-synthetic and turf-to-synthetic.

The numbers were crunched through the magnificently valuable *Daily Racing Form* Formulator online platform, and are accessible to any customer to crunch and decipher until your eyes bug out. That came about the 55-trainer mark for me, but I pressed on to 60 to make it a nice, even number. Turns out, "even" was the key word I discovered once I started comparing what I had transferred to my spreadsheets from Formulator.

Was I surprised by the results? Admittedly, yes. While I like to consider myself about as open-minded about all-weather surfaces as any racing person in the media forefront, even I had heard too much talk about the turf edge to think that it didn't at least exist in a small manner. I figured the study would show that turf-to-synthetic moves were, indeed, more potent.

I know some of you out there really, really want to hate synthetic surfaces. But if you think it's because the racing somehow is unfairly tilted toward turf horses, it's not my numbers that refute your point. It's the numbers of 60 of the top horsemen in America.

But I know darned well that if a European or American turf horse wins once or twice in a big race on Breeders' Cup day that it will trump those 7,330 starters examined here. After all, it's much easier to add to the friction than find the facts.

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