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Industry moves toward using data to prevent injuries

by [Ed DeRosa](#)

When it comes to handicapping races, bettors have seemingly endless data to consult before picking a winner, but when it comes to racehorse safety, some in the racing industry have to rely on anecdotal evidence.

Charles Hayward, president of New York Racing Association, said during the Symposium on Racing and Gaming that NYRA tracks have no plans to install a synthetic surface at any of its facilities.

Rick Arthur, D.V.M., equine medical director of the California Horse Racing Board, said at a later panel during the symposium that Hayward told him synthetic surfaces cause soft tissue injuries.

"Our data doesn't indicate that," Arthur said. "Our trainers in Southern California will tell you that [synthetic surfaces cause soft tissue injuries], but I don't care what they tell you; it's not true."

The data Arthur referred to is a compilation of information gathered about in-competition horses after they suffered a serious injury, many of which were catastrophic.

"If there's a message here, it's that 90% of catastrophic injuries had a pre-existing condition," Arthur said. "To be fair, that doesn't mean we'd have been able to see all of them, but the pathology is there."

The industry has developed several programs to track those injuries. The post mortem program in California allows veterinarians to perform a necropsy on all equine athletes who die during racing or training.

Sue Stover, D.V.M., oversees the program and said that equine deaths have trended upward in recent years, but that she is confident the deaths will decrease because of the information the program has yielded.

Another program is the Equine Injury Database developed by Mary Scollay, D.V.M., in conjunction with the Jockey Club. The program was rolled out in May 2007 with 48 racetracks in a pilot program, but that number has grown to 74 participants.

"Our patients [the horses] can't talk to us; they can't tell us their symptoms," Arthur said. "We have to look for signs."

Arthur said that not only veterinarians will use the information from these programs but also regulators, owners, and even handicappers. He said that the CHRB could begin publishing the names of trainers who start horses who suffer catastrophic injuries at a rate of more than four per 1,000 starts. Without giving names, he said some trainers have ten such injuries per 1,000 starters with one trainer rating as high as 40 per 1,000.

"Breakdowns on the track are racing's Achilles' heel," Arthur said. "We need to show the public we're addressing this."

A program on the horizon is a central testing laboratory for all of North American racing. C. Wayne McIlwraith, BV.Sc., Ph.D., director of equine orthopedic research at Colorado State University, is helping to establish the lab likely to be located in Maine.

"We're trying to create a culture of data," McIlwraith said of the problem of industry stakeholders relying on anecdotal evidence that Arthur touched on. "Every trainer wants to blame the racetrack [surface] whenever I have to perform surgery on one of their horses. We want to validate tracks and assure horsemen that these surfaces are the best they can be."

Ed DeRosa is news editor of Thoroughbred Times

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