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Jockey Safety No Sure Bet, Dangerous Sport Seeks Improvements

By Jennie Rees

They delicately balance themselves, not in the saddle, but crouched just above it, with their boots in narrow stirrups. Little more than their ankles and lower calves actually touch their horses, running at speeds up to 40 mph, often bunched tightly, bumping in a crowded field.

There can be so much flying dirt that they might go through four or five pairs of goggles in a race, pulling them down one at a time — all while changing holds on the reins, managing a whip and concentrating on the positions of their horse and those nearby and ahead.

One lapse in focus, one misstep, one clipped heel can send a thoroughbred jockey — and perhaps his mount — to the ground, where the impact is compounded by the prospect of being crushed by the horse or struck by a trailing competitor.

The danger is very real.

According to statistics collected by the Jockeys' Guild, which represents riders in financial and workplace issues involving tracks and horsemen, 128 riders have died since 1940 from injuries suffered on racetracks in the United States. That includes an average of at least one a year from 1991 — when there were three deaths — until now.

Even more jockeys are crippled while racing; currently, about 60 riders who suffered brain or spinal-cord injuries receive modest aid from the industry's Permanently Disabled Jockeys Fund.

Yet there is no national database of jockey injuries. And some jockeys and others in the industry — in part citing equine safety and welfare initiatives made after the fatal breakdown of 2008 Kentucky Derby runner-up Eight Belles — say there's more focus on the horses than the human athletes.

It “is not even close,” said Terry Meyocks, national manager of the Jockeys' Guild and a former track executive, who contends too many horsemen have the attitude that if something happens to a rider, “there's another one who will go out and ride the horse the next race.”

Jockeys applaud any improvement in equine safety and acknowledge it also helps protect the riders. And they praise jockey-safety measures at prominent tracks such as Lexington's Keeneland Race Course and Louisville-based Churchill Downs Inc.

But the Jockeys' Guild and others say national standards are necessary to minimize the danger, no matter the track where he or she rides.

“If a rider had gone down in (the Eight Belles) accident, you kind of wonder if there would be the same outcry,” said Dr. Barry Schumer, Keeneland's medical director, who noted that riders have told him “they feel they probably don't get the same level of concern the horses do in some ways.

“... The riders are injured, they're scooped up off the track, and off they go,” he said. “I think everybody does their best to sort of put a positive spin on it. But the fact is, there are some real tragedies.”

Specifically, the Guild and others cite the need for:

A coordinated, nationwide effort to document jockey injuries and the conditions in which they occur, which would allow officials to spot trends and the need for industrywide changes. Such tracking of equine fatalities began two years ago after the fatal breakdowns of 2006 Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro and Eight Belles in '08, but there is no such database for jockey injuries.

Implementation of national standards for safety equipment, ambulances, on-site medical personnel and procedures for dealing with injuries.

More stringent requirements for getting a jockey's license and more consistent and severe enforcement of rules intended to prevent reckless riding.

Increased jockey involvement in designing safety equipment and greater collaboration with other sports to piggyback off innovative technology. For instance, could racing some day adapt the safety-vest airbag technology now in its infancy for motorcycle racing?

Better insurance and financial protection for injured jockeys.

The National Thoroughbred Racing Association, an alliance of tracks and horsemen, believes its new Safety & Integrity Alliance will bring the industry together to implement many of those measures.

“People's heads are in the right place; I think sometimes it takes more time than we want,” said Mike Ziegler, the safety alliance's executive director. “The ball's moving, but there's a lot more to be done. ... This is the first step out of the gate. And every year, these standards are going to get raised.”

Apprentice jockey Michael Straight, who suffered head and spinal-cord injuries in a spill at Arlington Park last August, is among those who agree changes are necessary.

“A lot of people out there don't think about the jockey safety,” said Straight, who remains paralyzed. “They don't see you actually go down all the time. But if you're in the (jocks') room, you definitely know the pain of the game.”

'INCREDIBLY BRAVE'
Jockeys face dangers

The last significant study of jockey injuries in the United States was published in 2000 by emergency-medicine researchers at the University of North Carolina.

That study, based on 1993-96, reported 6,545 injuries serious enough for treatment among 2,700 licensed jockeys at 114 U.S. tracks. Nearly 20 percent of the injuries were to the riders' heads or necks. More than a third occurred in or around starting gates, accounting for 30 percent of the head injuries.

The Jockeys' Guild says its most recent figures show there were 1,792 licensed riders in the U.S. who rode at least one race in 2007. The Kentucky Horse Racing Commission licensed 174 riders in 2009.

While there is no more recent national data on jockey injuries, Keeneland says it treated eight jockeys for injuries and sent three to the hospital for observation or treatment during 32 racing days last year. Churchill, during its 66 race days in 2009, had 12 jockeys checked out by its first-aid department, with one going to the hospital by ambulance and a couple of others later going on their own.

Dr. Michael Karpf, who is head of the University of Kentucky's A.B. Chandler Hospital, a level-one trauma center where Keeneland sends injured riders, said he is surprised he doesn't see more at his hospital.

“The first time I saw them (races) close up, it really scared the living daylights out of me in terms of the potential for chain reactions and (to) have multiple jockeys going down,” he said, adding that jockeys “are incredibly brave individuals.”

Most jockeys who go down in a spill or starting-gate accident are back riding in a day or two. Others might be out for two to eight weeks if they break a collarbone, arm or leg — the most frequent fractures jockeys incur.

When Julia Brimo went down last October at Keeneland, she suffered a contusion to her spinal cord, initially causing paralysis in her arms and legs. She is walking again and has regained significant movement in her arms. She vows to ride again.

Two Arlington Park jockeys — Rene Douglas and Straight, the apprentice — were not so fortunate. Neither can walk today.

Douglas — winner of 3,588 races, including the 1996 Belmont Stakes — was paralyzed after a spill at Arlington last May. Straight's accident came three months later.

Straight's long-term prognosis is uncertain, but he said that he has no regrets or bitterness. “If I ... wasn't so injured, I'd probably be a jockey after it heals up,” he said. “It's something I love.”

Meyocks suggested that the industry may take advantage of such sentiments — although he praises individuals such as prominent farm owners Bill Casner of WinStar and Will Farish of Lane's End for their work in helping disabled riders.

“We've got to take care of the horses, no question,” said Meyocks, the third generation in his family to be in racing. “ ... The horse doesn't have the choice (to race), but the riders do and they know the danger. But at the same time, the entire industry needs to make sure we do everything we can not only for the jocks, but the exercise riders and trainers.”

New York jockey Richard Migliore agreed, noting that while the inherent danger is “something we accept,” more needs to be done to help ensure safety and take care of those who suffer major injuries.

Migliore, who returned to riding after sustaining a near-fatal neck injury in 1988, was interviewed before learning April 12 that he'd re-fractured several vertebrae when his mount suffered a fatal breakdown in a Jan. 23 race at Aqueduct — meaning he'd been riding two months with a broken neck. He'll have surgery May 4 and will be out six to eight months.

IMPROVEMENTS

Safety alliance rules have increased safety

Recent interviews with riders across the country show that not everyone sees the need for major safety changes. California jockeys, in particular, had only good things to say about how progressive racing authorities there are on safety matters.

“Don't worry about the jockeys; the jockeys will be fine,” said Corey Nakatani, who suggested that the economics of the sport is a bigger concern. “Worry about getting owners into the game.”

Retired Hall of Fame rider Don Brumfield, now a steward at Gulfstream Park near Fort Lauderdale, noted how far things have come since he started riding in 1954, when he said the only safety equipment was “a cork skullcap and a jock strap.”

But proponents of increased safety measures have some powerful backers, including officials at Keeneland, one of the first tracks to add protective padding in the starting gate and one of the few to employ a medical director with the authority to establish policy.

“There is never a day that you've conquered” all the safety issues in racing, Keeneland president Nick Nicholson said. “There is never a day when there is final victory.”

The NTRA safety alliance, which the Guild strongly supports, also is pushing states and racetracks to implement its recommended safety standards.

To date, the alliance's 16 accredited members — including Churchill, Keeneland and Turfway in Kentucky — must adhere to these requirements:

Every person on a horse or pony on the track must wear a helmet that meets safety standards specified by the Association of Racing Commissioners International, the Lexington-based trade association of state and national regulators.

Safety vests designed to provide shock-absorption protection must be worn by anyone on a horse, as well as assistant starters working on the starting gate.

Starting gates should be padded, according to the commissioner group's rules, to better protect horse and jockey.

Use of the new Jockey Health Information System, an Internet-based program inspired by Keeneland's Schumer, in which riders provide medical information such as previous injuries and allergies before they ride so it is available in the event of an emergency at the track.

“Not only is it the right thing to do, but the fans are demanding it,” said NTRA president Alex Waldrop. “. . . We have to do everything we possibly can within reason to ensure the safety of our human and equine athletes.”

RAILS AND GATES

But much work remains to be done

Two of the biggest advancements in protecting riders and horses have been what are generically called safety rails (the earliest versions surfaced in the 1980s) and, more recently, padding starting gates.

Safety rails are designed to reduce injuries to riders thrown into the inner rail of the track. The 24-inch-wide flexible aluminum cover, slightly tilted, uses a trampoline effect to bounce riders inward, out of harm's way.

Churchill spent \$230,000 in 2001 for a safety rail patented by Louisville-based industry leader Horsemen's Track and Equipment in 2001, and updated it several years ago.

Keeneland was the first track in the state to install a safety rail in 1983 and replaced it in 2006. It also began in 2000 teaming with Equine Environmental Consulting near Harrodsburg, to use high-tech materials to cover any metal in the starting gate that a horse or human could touch. Churchill followed a few years later, adding the material in stages and finishing last year.

Other innovations include collapsible rails on some turf courses; vastly improved safety vests and helmets; and distance track poles made of softer synthetics rather than the traditional wood or metal.

But such efforts can be expensive.

Churchill Downs Inc. says it spends about \$1 million a year in safety-related measures at its four tracks, while Keeneland, which is at the forefront of the push for jockey safety, spends more than \$500,000.

Jack Hanessian, general manager for Cincinnati's River Downs, says it cannot afford the safety rail advocated by the Jockeys' Guild. It would cost about \$500,000 “that we don't have,” he said. And he challenges the name “safety rail,” saying, “We don't like to consider our rail as unsafe.”

The New York Racing Association also does not use safety rails at Saratoga, Belmont or Aqueduct.

Meanwhile, budget cuts have forced some tracks to reduce numbers of assistant starters, who help load horses into the gates and ensure the safety of jockeys and horses.

The Jockeys' Guild says just such situations underscore the need for a national database on jockey accidents.

The idea is that a collaborative effort to review all accidents — where they happen on the track; what type surface; what safety equipment was used— could allow experts to spot dangerous trends and specific need for changes.

“It's something that has been talked about a long time but there's been no movement on it,” Schumer said. “That's an example of what we can do to improve not only to help prevent injuries but to learn how to better treat them so we can have better outcomes.”

Some trainers and jockeys note anecdotally, for example, that there seems to be an increase in cases of fractured vertebrae in the neck. Could that be an unintended result of certain safety-vest designs?

A database might also help resolve questions raised after the three spinal-cord injuries occurring on Polytrack surfaces in a five-month span last year: Could synthetic surfaces be a factor in the degree of injuries?

Keeneland's Nicholson, whose track is co-owner of the North American Polytrack-brand of synthetic surfaces, says he doesn't think so, and he noted there was a death on a dirt track last year.

But he agreed the issue should be part of further research into safety. “We have to be intellectually objective and honest.”

Prominent rider John Velazquez, chairman of the Jockeys' Guild, said such industry openness is key to long-term safety improvements.

“Things have changed a little in the sense that we have better communication with the industry, and it seems like we're trying to put things together and work with one another,” he said. “But there's a lot of work to do, still a lot of things to get done for us to get where we're supposed to be.”