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Hole Repaired in Churchill Downs' Backstretch

By Jennie Rees

A hole about 8-10 inches across and a couple of feet deep mysteriously surfaced on Churchill Downs' racetrack Wednesday morning, halting training for two hours while it was repaired.

Though some trainers expressed concern, training resumed without incident. There was no racing scheduled for Wednesday. Training and racing are expected to proceed normally Thursday.

Track superintendent Butch Lehr speculated it was a sinkhole of some fashion and said he had not seen anything like it in his 43 years working on the track, which is regarded as one of the safest in the country. The hole was deep enough that it penetrated through the track's eight inches of cushion and compacted pad and the 12-inch clay base, reaching into the deep subbase of sandy loam.

Lehr called the hole "about two feet" deep while some trainers who saw it said it was three.

"I think it was a freak thing," Lehr said. "I've never seen it happen here. ... With all the rains we've had, it could have been developing for a while. But there are no sewer lines under there, no water lines under there. I'm certain of that. ... If it was something like that, we'd have a problem. I think the ground just had a little crevice there and broke away."

Lehr said his maintenance crew thoroughly tamped in the hole with the materials that make up the base and the cushion.

Racetrack safety specialist Dr. Mick Peterson of the University of Maine is coming Friday with his ground-penetrating sonar to do a thorough scan of the racing surface and track base.

Lehr said Peterson, an engineering professor who is an acclaimed expert on racing surfaces and determining their consistency, did the same kind of inspection of Churchill's entire track base Derby Week. "After he did the sonar, he said our base was in good shape and really gave us rave reviews," Lehr said.

The hole occurred before the far turn on the backstretch. It appeared to be about a third of the way in from the outer rail of the 79-foot-wide backstretch. That meant it was out of the way where horses were working near the inner rail or galloping counterclockwise in the middle of the track, though it fell in an area where horses routinely pull up after their morning exercise. Horses who are jogging clockwise stay toward the outer rail.

Training begins at 6 each morning, after tractors have harrowed the surface. The hole was detected about 6:30. Jockey Miguel Mena said he was jogging a filly to warm up before a work and felt her back end fall toward the ground.

"I thought, 'What the heck happened?'" he said.

Mena said he didn't realize at the time that the filly apparently caught the edge of the hole with a hind leg. She was fine and completed her work, but when he pulled her up afterward, he saw trainer Helen Pitts-Blasi on her pony by the hole to keep others away.

"Very lucky," Mena said. "Thank God we were just jogging. ... A hole like that, a horse galloping or breezing steps in it, it's going to be ugly for the jock and the horse. ... What's going to happen? He's going to break his entire leg."

Tom Amoss, who trains the filly, sent other horses out to the track after the hole was repaired.

"But I'm not going anywhere near that hole and I'm not doing any fast work, either," he said. " ... An arbitrary hole in the track where they never had one before says to me it's a big problem that they need to find out what the heck it is."

After repairing the hole, Lehr said he was glad "it's on the outside. After we looked at it pretty good, we went in there and tamped it down good and solid."

Lehr later told a Churchill publicist: "We're going to watch it real close. I did some grading on it today, and I believe we took care of the problem. But we want to take a close look at the track when Mick Peterson gets here with his sonar."

Trainer Lynn Whiting expressed the sentiment of others when he said, "I'm not knowledgeable of these situations, but the dirt had to go somewhere. I hope we've seen the last of it, but I don't have any **confidence** that would be the case."

Trainer Dale Romans, who worked horses after the track reopened, said, "I trust Butch's judgment. He wouldn't have reopened it if he didn't think it was safe