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NTRA battles public opinion

By Matt Hegarty

TUCSON, Ariz. - Officials of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association said they expected to recommend Thursday a series of steps designed to improve safety conditions for racehorses, responding to what some officials see as a widespread crisis of confidence in the sport.

Twice this week, officials who have worked with the NTRA during the past year to survey the opinions of racing fans have pointed to a significant decline in the public perception of racing, even among hard-core fans. The decline - which one marketing official said was the biggest he had seen in the last five years of polling racing fans - comes after a series of high-profile breakdowns in national racing telecasts the last three years.

The NTRA is expected to announce the recommendations at the University of Arizona Symposium on Racing, a conference that began Tuesday and will end with a safety panel that includes the NTRA's current president, Bob Elliston of Turfway Park.

On Tuesday, Jonathan Chavez, the co-founder of a marketing company used by the NTRA to survey racing fans over the past five years, said that numbers measuring the confidence of fans dropped 12 to 13 points in the last year. Chavez later said that the public perception of racing may have reached a "tipping point" in which racing will need to act soon to restore confidence or face the permanent loss of a sizeable portion of its base.

On Monday at a separate conference put on by the Association of American Equine Practitioners, Craig Dado, vice president of marketing at Del Mar, cited statistics from NTRA surveys that showed that "the more you know about racing, the less you believe it's a sport of integrity." Dado later presented data showing that 42 percent of racing fans believe that performance-enhancing drugs are a "serious problem" in racing, despite the fact that most racing regulators believe the deliberate abuse of drugs is extremely rare.

Since Barbaro's breakdown in the 2006 Preakness, racing has been pummeled by a series of breakdowns that have shaken even hard-core fans. Later that year, the top-class mare Pine Island broke down in the Breeders' Cup Distaff; then, in 2007, the popular European horse George Washington broke down in the Breeders' Cup Classic; and finally, in 2008, Eight Belles, a

3-year-old filly, broke down just after finishing second in the Kentucky Derby. In addition, both Arlington Park in Illinois and Del Mar in 2006 suffered through spates of breakdowns that in part were the impetus to the installation of artificial surfaces at both tracks in 2007.

According to Chavez, the loss of confidence wasn't only due to the breakdowns. Racing fans, both casual and hard-core, also were put off by the last-place finish of Big Brown in this year's Belmont Stakes shortly after his trainer, Richard Dutrow Jr., said the colt had been taken off his regular monthly injection of an anabolic steroid. That led to widespread concerns over the "overmedication" of horses, Chavez said.

Racing has largely tackled the steroid problem by passing rules banning the drugs for all but therapeutic uses. But experts still differ on how to minimize the incidence of horse deaths, an inescapable aspect of racing - or even the life of a wild horse - given a horse's skeletal structure and the strains of running full speed. Many racing fans have become jaded to the sight of breakdowns, but it's clear in today's Internet world that the rest of the population is becoming increasingly sensitive to ontrack horse deaths.

Although artificial surfaces have been lauded by supporters for reducing breakdown rates, some skeptics remain. Charles Hayward, the chief executive of the New York Racing Association, said Tuesday night at the

Tucson conference that NYRA has decided that it will not install an artificial surface at any of its tracks, either for racing or training, because of the association's admirable safety record at its tracks over the past two years. It is Hayward's contention that a properly maintained dirt track, coupled with aggressive veterinary oversight, can work just as well as an artificial surface.

The recommendations that are expected to be announced on Thursday will seek to have tracks adopt specific safety standards in order for the tracks to be certified. Tracks would not be required to adopt the recommendations, but NTRA officials said they were hopeful that industry and public pressure would persuade the tracks to adopt the safety measures.

Unless the incidence of racehorse deaths decline soon, officials said, racing may find it hard to hold on to its existing fans as well as draw new ones from the generations of customers that are increasingly sensitive to animal-rights issues.

"It's not whether you can afford to do this," Marsha Kelly, a public-relations expert who works with the greyhound industry, said during a panel in Tucson on Tuesday. "It's that you can't afford not to."to."

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