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### NY Trainers Weigh in on Toe Grabs

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**Gary Contessa, leading trainer in New York, is accepting of the new toe grab rule issued by NYRA.**

Photo: Anne M. Eberhardt

Some leading New York trainers said a ban on toe grabs will help level the playing field, but they're not all convinced the shoes are responsible for catastrophic breakdowns.

The New York Racing Association in early August said it would ban the use of toe grabs with a height greater than two millimeters (.07874 inches) on front horseshoes effective Oct. 29, opening day of Aqueduct's fall meet. NYRA's edict was a result of the American Graded Stakes Committee announcement that graded stakes run at racetracks that haven't implemented The Jockey Club Thoroughbred Safety Committee's recommendation to abolish such toe grabs would lose their grade, effective Jan. 1, 2009.

The Jockey Club and graded stakes committee cited research that toe grabs greater than two millimeters on front horseshoes increase the risk of catastrophic injuries. Even though the ruling doesn't abolish toe grabs, for all practical

purpose it does because the reduced height will offer little in the terms of the grab a trainer is looking for when he or she outfits a horse with the shoe.

Gary Contessa, the leader trainer on the NYRA circuit the last two years, said he is going to keep an open mind about the new rule, and is interested to see after a year's time the effect it has had, if any, on his operation. Contessa has more than 100 horses in his care. All his horses race with toe grabs but do not train in them.

"It's going to be something new for me, but it's a level playing field, so I'm not going to fight City Hall on this," Contessa said. "A year from now, when I have had a year of no toe grabs and you want to interview me, I might have more to say. My fear without toe grabs is--and this is not with any scientific data to prove or disprove my theory--if you are not using toe grabs, will there be a slide forward effect that is going to affect tendons and (cause suspensory injuries)? So my fear is maybe less bone fractures and more soft-tissue injuries. But who knows?"

"I saw the scientific data from the people looking to get rid of toe grabs, and I must admit it was rather compelling. Bill Casner from WinStar put out a 15-page brochure, and a video I saw. I got to admit, seeing the scientific evidence against toe grabs was rather compelling, so I'm not up in arms over this. I am willing to accept this and see where it takes us.

"The problem is that no one out there has done a pro-scientific study in favor of toe grabs, so there is nothing to counter the very compelling videos and the very compelling scientific data that says we should go without toe grabs."

Contessa, who does a fair amount of claiming horses, noted some of his high-profile rivals do not use toe grabs, and it doesn't seem to be standing in the way of their success.

"I know that I claim a lot of horses off (Steve) Asmussen and (Todd) Pletcher, and those guys don't use them," Contessa said. "They seem to be doing very well without them, so I just hope I still have the same continued success without them."

Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito uses toe grabs on his horses to train. He said it is particularly effective on Saratoga's Oklahoma training track, which tends to be a deep surface, and therefore a toe grab aids a horse in getting hold of the track. Depending upon their individual needs, Zito also uses toe grabs on many of the horses he races.

"The graded stakes committee made this rule, so NYRA is handcuffed because if they want their graded status, they have to do what they want them to do, and they don't want toe grabs," Zito said. "However, I don't think it makes much sense. I can tell you the people that use toe grabs: Allen Jerkens, Jimmy Jerkens, Kiaran McLaughlin, Bruce Levine, Gary Contessa, Mike Hushion, Nick Zito. That's a pretty good line-up. I don't know of any catastrophic injuries that I have seen over the years with toe grabs. They claim it causes injuries, so what can I say?"

"Obviously, they are trying to protect the horse, and their heart is in the right place, but I don't know how much of an affect it will really have. It might cause other injuries. I don't know. The toe grab, according to them, causes injuries, so I give them credit, because if they can help horses, what can I say? On the other hand, I'm not too sure about this. I haven't had any problems with this over the last 20 odd years."

Allen Jerkens, who has been training horses since 1950, has been using toe grabs for decades. He said he was puzzled by the move because he never equated toe grabs that exceeded two millimeters in height as being dangerous.

"I don't know why all of the sudden they think that is the reason for everything," Jerkens said. "There have always been toes on the shoes, even when they used steel shoes. My horses have been shod like that for a long time. I suppose there is merit to everything (safety committees) do, though I never thought that was the reason (for injuries). I do believe, though, it is probably not a good idea to overdo a toe."

"If that is what they want, and everybody does it, it's what you have to do. Everybody will be in the same boat. Some horses probably will be better suited to running without them. It probably will depend upon the stride. It certainly will save a lot of running around looking for a blacksmith."

Jerkens' son, Jimmy, said he believes younger horses would benefit from the new rule.

"Two-year-olds will probably be better off (without toe grabs)," Jerkens said. "As long as we are allowed to use something to push off behind, it will be OK."

The NYRA ruling also eliminates bends, jar caulks, stickers, or any other traction device on front hooves.

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