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Professionals Have Different Opinions on Medications and Injuries, but Changes are Undeniable

By Michael Veitch

The following is the second installment in a multi-column exclusive examining medication in horse racing.

In last Wednesday's column that opened the series, New York trainers Jim Bond, Gary Contessa and Pat Kelly shared their thoughts and practices on the administration of Lasix and other medications.

Today, the trio speaks about the relationship of breakdowns and medication, plus the use of steroids.

"I think track surfaces are the keys here," said Bond. "A track has four hours of training in the morning, then has only an hour or two to get ready for five or six hours of racing in the afternoon. And there are the variables of cold, rain, wind and so forth. Whether or not we are talking synthetic or dirt, it is very hard to keep a consistent surface."

Bond made note of the modern trend of many trainers using training centers or private facilities located away from the racetrack.

Contessa has a somewhat different view, questioning whether or not there is actually more medication being used, compared to when he began working with thoroughbreds in the 1970s.

He pointed to more and precise testing in our time as the reason it seems there is heavier medication.

"I think, and I have thought, for many years, that the unregulated use of steroids is the reason breakdowns have increased," said Contessa. "Now that all steroids have been banned I think you will see a gradual return to stronger boned horses that last longer and stay sounder."

Kelly offered yet a third interpretation, suggesting that training practices themselves have changed.

"The old-timers weeded them out before they got to the races, so you had a horse that had already been proven by the time it was ready to race," he said. "They just trained them harder and got a lot of that done early. Today, we've got this idea you only race a few times a year and need only two preps for the Kentucky Derby."

All three horsemen see a need for the occasional administration of steroids, and are emphatic they should not be part of the race day itself.

Bond said that geldings, or castrated horses that lack testosterone, can be dull, and often benefit from steroids.

“I know this is a touchy issue,” he said. “But what about an owner who invests his money in such a horse? If he can perform effectively, it's a win-win for the owner, the government, and the fans.”

Contessa also noted the limited use of steroids, and emphasized they should not be part of the racing experience.

“They've destroyed some humans, so for sure they can destroy horses,” he said. “We love our horses. Like athletes, they have their aches and pains, but other than body language they have few ways of telling us when something is wrong. I want people to know they are part of our family and we do not use them just for profit. Medication is used to support the horse, not abuse him.”

Kelly agreed, saying steroids are beneficial for recovering from injury and surgery.

“They also help horses coming off the farm,” he said. “But no, they should not be used close to a race and I think the way New York has regulated it is right. Moderation here is not a bad thing, but some people were overdoing it.”

Saratoga veterinarian Dr. Jim Prendergast, who has been practicing for decades, deeply loves thoroughbred racing and its culture.

He has been a defender of the Oklahoma Training Track during times of crisis, and among the greats he has worked with is the immortal Ruffian.

Dr. Prendergast remained with Ruffian in the recovery room following her tragic fatal breakdown in the match race with Foolish Pleasure at Belmont Park on July 6, 1975.

Anybody who knows Dr. Prendergast knows he wouldn't do it any other way.

Over the years, he and I have had many talks on the issue of soundness in the thoroughbred, and like Kelly, I wonder about the modern trend of very light racing.

“I just can't believe,” said Dr. Prendergast, “that three or four hundred years of breeding can suddenly be changed in a mere thirty or forty years. It just doesn't make genetic or evolutionary sense.”

That comment got to me.

Coming next Wednesday: A look at a few studies on the subject and what they have to say.