



# Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit

Sponsored by the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation

Issue 5

September 2008

## Horsemen's Update

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### Steroids

Open any racing publication these days and you are bound to find an article about anabolic steroid use in racing. Many of these articles concern the detrimental affects of anabolic steroid use. But what are the facts surrounding these uses and how is it affecting the welfare and safety of our horses? The purpose of this newsletter is to inform as well as to educate horsemen, be they trainers, owners, breeders or consignors, of the facts surrounding anabolic steroids and the new regulations that are in place at this time.

#### What are anabolic steroids?

The simplest definition of anabolic steroid is a synthetic steroid used to promote tissue growth. In horses, steroids can consist of corticosteroids or anabolic steroids. Corticosteroids, such as prednisone, have many therapeutic properties generally aiding in the reduction of inflammation. Anabolic steroids have many therapeutic properties as well.

When asked to describe the effects of anabolic steroids in racehorses, Dr. Larry Bramlage responded, "Principally [they] keep them eating and help them deal with training stress." He further said, "You don't want to give enough to make them muscle bound."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, when used correctly, anabolic steroids have their purpose, but it must be on the conscience of trainers, owners, consignors and veterinarians not to abuse them and to always keep the welfare of the horse in mind.

Currently there are four anabolic steroids that are permitted in horse racing: boldenone (Equipose), nandrolone (Durabolin), stanozolol (Winstrol), and testosterone. These can be used for therapeutic purposes only. Mostly, they are used for recovery from surgery or debilitating sickness, to increase appetite, after castration, or to increase weight on light or hard-to-maintain horses. The performance-enhancing abilities of these products have not been directly linked, but their effects can influence the horse.

Dr. Rick Arthur, the California Horse Racing Board's equine medical director, was quoted in a June 24 CHRB news release:

"They (anabolic steroids) help horses eat better and withstand the mental stress of hard training. The horses become more aggressive. Some horses clearly get bigger and stronger. Obviously, increased strength, and a tougher mental attitude all would be considered positive traits in a racehorse, artificially produced positive traits. Anabolic steroids allow horses to train harder. Perhaps, too hard. Over-training is a significant factor in many of the catastrophic injuries suffered by our horses. Therefore, in addition to the performance-enhancing issue, eliminating anabolic steroids could very well have a favorable, long-term impact on the longevity of horses' racing careers."<sup>2</sup>

#### INDUSTRY EFFECTS

The entire industry is affected by the use of anabolic steroids, which can be found from the breeding farms and sales rings to the training centers and racetracks. Most of the time horses receive these products for therapeutic reasons, which can be beneficial. However, abuse of these drugs calls into question the overall welfare and safety of the horse.

#### Sales Industry

Horse sales are big business. Buyers want big, precocious horses to either race, pinhook, or breed. In years past, there have been whispers on the sales grounds as to whether certain horses are on anabolic steroids or not. Weanlings and yearlings have reasons for receiving anabolic steroids, just as racehorses do — injury, surgery, etc. — but a long-term regimen to increase muscle mass for the sales is abuse. One common complaint is that after a horse is purchased, the horse goes to a new farm and then "falls apart." The horse will lose weight, its appetite will diminish, and its coat will dull. This could be the result of anabolic steroid abuse.

One safeguard that buyers now have is the new regulations that have been implemented by the largest sales companies in the country. Keeneland, Ocala Breeders' Sales, Fasig Tipton, and Barretts have all implemented policies prohibiting the use of anabolic steroids within 45 days of a sale. They have also given the buyer the option to test for anabolic steroids and void the sale for a positive test.

Tom Ventura of OBS stated, "Limiting the use of anabolic steroids can only have a positive effect on sale prices. Any policy which increases the level of confidence of buyers should encourage and expand their participation. At the same time, consignors will sell on a level playing field with less concern for the actions of unscrupulous competitors."<sup>3</sup>

In February 2008, the OBS Selected 2-Year-Olds in Training Sale was the first 2-year-old sale to implement the new regulations. All 48 tests requested were negative. Ventura applauded the swiftness of the University of Florida Racing Laboratory, which returned many of the tests within three working days. He also predicted, "Testing procedures will continue to be refined and perfected; and all participants in the racing industry will unite with a common goal of providing uniform practical rules regarding not only steroids but all medications."<sup>3</sup> The most recent sales figures show that buyers are backing the new testing policies. The select Fasig Tipton Saratoga Yearling sales had a 24.6% post testing rate from purchasers.

### **Breeding Industry**

Anabolic steroids can effect mare reproduction and stallion performance. Many fillies come straight off the track to be bred or are bred while still in training. If these fillies are on an anabolic steroid regimen, it can prove difficult to get them in foal. The main concerns for fillies are smaller ovaries, disrupted or altered estrous cycles, and reduced pregnancy rate.<sup>4</sup> Breeding stallions can be affected by lower sperm count and sperm quality.<sup>4</sup>

Many young mares are purchased out of a sale with the intent to be bred in mid-February. There are differing opinions among buyers as to whether steroidal effects from the racetrack affect the sale of broodmare prospects. One leading buyer said it has never been a factor, but Kenny McPeek, a leading trainer and bloodstock agent, said, "Yes, it could affect a filly and her productive abilities. The effects of steroids would be learned over a period of time and the mare's ability to cycle properly."<sup>5</sup>

Buyers should always do their homework.

### **Racing Industry**

The effects of anabolic steroid use in racing are widespread. Some horses receive monthly injections as standard protocol for the racing stable. It is important for trainers to understand what is actually going on in a horse's system when it is subjected to a long-term steroid regimen. The welfare and safety of the horse should be first and foremost.

Dr. Mary Scollay, the equine medical director for the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission, believes that the use of anabolic steroids does affect the number of breakdowns. The extra muscle mass causes pressure on the horse's skeleton, thus producing microfractures that can lead to breakdown.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to problems with using anabolic steroids, the withdrawal effects can be just as detrimental. The 1992 Auburn University case (which can be found in the Oct. 15, 1993, issue of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*) recently summarized in the Aug. 2, 2008, issue of *Thoroughbred Times*,<sup>7</sup> described the extreme effects of suddenly stopping an anabolic steroid regimen. The case involved a non-racing American Quarter Horse that had received Winstrol injections once a month, starting as a yearling, for eight years. The abrupt nature in which the injections were stopped caused adrenal exhaustion that contributed to weight loss, anorexia, muscle wasting, dull hair coat, and lethargy.<sup>7</sup>

The *Thoroughbred Times* article also contained the following quote from Gary Porter, Ph.D., correlating the increase in fatigue from steroid withdrawal with breakdowns:

"My judgment is that when horses are down-regulating from having been taken off some exogenous agent like anabolic steroids, they're likely to become fatigued easier and quicker than they would have otherwise. And if that is the case, then definitely that would be a precipitating cause or at least a predisposing cause for them to be more likely to experience hyperextension of joints, overloaded bone, and therefore an injury."<sup>7</sup>

This particular case only involved the outcome of this one particular horse. However, it shows that abruptly stopping an extended anabolic steroid regimen poses risks to the horse.

From a training standpoint, it is important to attempt to receive as much data on a new horse as possible. "Yes, it would be nice," said Kenny McPeek when asked if he would want to know if a new horse that shipped into his barn was previously on an anabolic steroid

regimen. “We will pay close attention to eating habits and overall energy levels. Blood work is always helpful.”<sup>5</sup>

To lessen the withdrawal effects on a horse that was previously on a steroid regimen, equine surgeon Dr. Larry Bramlage advised, “Just reduce the dose gradually.”<sup>1</sup>

### Regulations

In January 2007, the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium Inc. (RMTC) called upon all state jurisdictions to adopt the RCI Androgenic Anabolic Steroid Model Rule by December 31, 2008.<sup>8</sup> Currently 14 states have adopted the model rules and 17 others are at various stages of implementation.

The model rule permits the use of one of the four approved anabolic steroids under prescribed threshold levels. Currently, all four approved drugs are listed as Class 3 drugs, categorized as drugs that may or may not have generally accepted use in racehorses. All are designated to carry Category B penalties.

The currently suggested withdrawal time is a minimum of 30-45 days.<sup>8</sup> If a horse tests positive, the following penalties are suggested under Category B of the RCI regulations:

1. First offense carries a minimum of a \$500 fine (maximum fine \$1,000) and 15-day suspension (max 60 days) for the trainer and disqualification and loss of purse for the owner. The horse will be placed on the vet’s list and must be approved before becoming eligible to be entered.

2. Second offense (within one year) carries a minimum of a \$1,000 fine and 30-day suspension for the trainer (max \$2,500 and 180 days) and disqualification and loss of purse for the owner. The horse will be placed on the vet’s list and must be approved before becoming eligible to be entered.

3. Third offense (within one year) carries a minimum of a \$2,500 fine and 60-day suspension for the trainer (max \$5,000 or 5% purse and one year) and

disqualification, loss of purse, and \$5,000 fine for the owner. The horse must be on the vet’s list for 45 days and must be approved before becoming eligible to be entered.

In March 2008, the RMTC and RCI recommended an implementation policy to help jurisdictions maintain a uniform regulatory process.<sup>9</sup> They recommend a 90-day grace period for initial testing prior to enforcement of penalties. Trainers would be notified during that time if they had a positive test. The minimum recommended withdrawal time is 30 days. One of the approved anabolic steroids can be used within the 30-day period if:

1. administered by a licensed veterinarian due to illness or injury where the steroid is necessary;
2. the veterinarian completes a treatment form and files it with the regulatory personnel within 24 hours of treatment; and
3. the horse tests below the threshold level prior to entry.

The recommendation further recognizes that, according to federal law, only licensed veterinarians can possess these steroids. Also, it gives the claimant the right to void a claim if the horse tests positive for an anabolic steroid.

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The Breeders’ Cup also released new regulations regarding the World Championships.<sup>10</sup> These regulations state that any trainer whose horse tests positive for anabolic steroids during the championship races will be subject to a one-year suspension from Breeders’ Cup participation. Any horse that tests positive will also be subject to loss of purse and a suspension.

Additionally, the Breeders’ Cup Challenge Races will be held only in states that have adopted the RCI model rule, or at tracks that have adopted the policy as a house rule.

Beginning with this year’s Breeders’ Cup at Santa Anita, the first four finishers and at least one other random horse from each of the 14 championship races will be subjected to anabolic steroid testing.

The British Horseracing Authority (BHA) is also taking steps to eliminate the use of anabolic steroids in non-European horses coming to Great Britain to race. Beginning Jan. 1, 2009, the BHA will require trainers outside of Europe to certify that their horses are not and have never trained on certain substances.

Tim Morris, the BHA's director of equine science and welfare, stated, "We will require a declaration from trainers of horses from outside Europe that they do not train, and have not ever trained, on non-therapeutic substances, and in particular on anabolic and partitioning agents." He continued by saying, "We wholeheartedly support international competition and welcome the move in the U.S. towards a harmonized model rule on the use of anabolic agents."<sup>11</sup>

### **What does this all mean for U.S. racing?**

Many concerns have been raised as to how these new regulations will change U.S. racing. Many ask how training will be affected. But the overall consensus is that these regulations will offer a level playing field.

In a recent article in *The Press Democrat*, a California publication, Tom Bachman of the Thoroughbred Owners of California stated in response to the U.S. being the only major racing nation that permits steroids, "You look at horses in Europe, Australia, and Japan and they are doing just fine. You have to ask: why are we doing this?"<sup>12</sup>

In the same article, a California trainer expressed his concerns that these regulations put trainers in a pinch. He stated that jurisdictions pressure trainers to race more often to fill races, but these new regulations will cause longer layoffs for horses.<sup>12</sup>

One disadvantage is that the U.S. has year-round racing. Many other countries have shorter racing

seasons, which allow horses to receive more time off. Another California-based trainer said, "Let the trainers go back to the old-fashioned way of training. Resting their horse. Spacing out races. Not training as hard."<sup>12</sup>

In Europe and other countries such as Australia, training occurs on smaller private facilities instead of at larger concentrated training facilities. This allows for more turnout and longer training time. Many U.S. training facilities do not have turnout, and the tracks are open only a few hours each morning for training.

Training methods and racing schedules may be changed slightly to accommodate the new regulations. Overall, most feel these regulations will benefit the safety and welfare of the horses. When asked, "In your opinion, will the regulation of steroids at the track be beneficial to the industry?" Kenny McPeck answered, "Yes, the breed will become stronger if we would eliminate drugs from the sport."<sup>5</sup> ■

To review further, see these websites and articles:

[www.grayson-jockeyclub.org/summit](http://www.grayson-jockeyclub.org/summit)

[www.rmtcnet.com](http://www.rmtcnet.com)

[www.arci.com](http://www.arci.com)

[www.britishhorseracing.com](http://www.britishhorseracing.com)

*The Horse* - "Understanding and Preventing Catastrophic Injuries," by Stacey Oke, DVM, MSC released July 2008

*Thoroughbred Times*, August 2, 2008, Volume 24, number 31 - "Steroids, Argument over anabolics - Examination of steroid use in American racing"

*The Blood-Horse*, March 1, 2008, No. 9 - "Global Training - How horses are conditioned around the world"

<sup>1</sup> Interview- Dr. Larry Bramlage via email on July 24, 2008

<sup>2</sup> CHRB News Release, June 24th, 2008- CHRB Seeks Comments on Steroid Regulations

<sup>3</sup> Interview Comments- Tom Ventura via email on July 24, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Robert N Oglesby, DVM. Anabolic Steroid Use in Horses. [www.horseadvice.com/cgi-bin/downlaod.remote.cgi/medications\\_boldenone.html](http://www.horseadvice.com/cgi-bin/downlaod.remote.cgi/medications_boldenone.html)

<sup>5</sup> Interview- Kenny McPeck via email on July 24, 2008

<sup>6</sup> *Thoroughbred Times*. August 2, 2008, Vol 24, Number 31. "Leading veterinarians see link between steroids, breakdowns." Page 24

<sup>7</sup> *Thoroughbred Times*. August 2, 2008, Vol 24, Number 31. "Kicking Steroids." Pages 26-27

<sup>8</sup> Press Release Jan 31, 2008. RMTTC Calls for Uniformity and a Timeline for the National Regulation of Anabolic Steroids. RMTTC, [www.rmtcnet.com/main.asp?id=3&s=2&article=342](http://www.rmtcnet.com/main.asp?id=3&s=2&article=342)

<sup>9</sup> Press Release Mar 26, 2008. RMTTC Board Recommends Policy on the Implementation of Anabolic/Androgenic Steroid Regulations. RMTTC, [www.rmtcnet.com/main.asp?id=3&s=2&article=336](http://www.rmtcnet.com/main.asp?id=3&s=2&article=336)

<sup>10</sup> *The Blood-Horse*, edited Breeders Cup release Aug 1, 2008. "Breeders Cup Adopts Tough Steroids Rule."

[www.bloodhorse.com/viewstory\\_plain.asp?id=46409](http://www.bloodhorse.com/viewstory_plain.asp?id=46409)

<sup>11</sup> *The Blood-Horse*. "Great Britain Stiffens Medication Policy." [www.bloodhorse.com/viewstory\\_plain.asp?id=46236](http://www.bloodhorse.com/viewstory_plain.asp?id=46236)

<sup>12</sup> *The Press Democrat*. [Pressdemocrat.com](http://Pressdemocrat.com). "Horses running drug-free." Pub: Tuesday July 29, 2008.

[www.pressdemocrat.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080729/NEWS/807290310/1033](http://www.pressdemocrat.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080729/NEWS/807290310/1033)

Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit  
821 Corporate Drive, Lexington, Ky. 40503  
(859) 224-2850 • [ebowen@jockeyclub.com](mailto:ebowen@jockeyclub.com)  
<http://www.grayson-jockeyclub.org>