

Welfare Summit Opens With Scientific Data, Frank Discussions

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Dr. Rick Arthur addresses participants at racehorse safety summit.

Photo: Anne M. Eberhardt

The public session that opened the Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit Monday morning in Lexington didn't provide just food for thought. The speakers and panelists served up a huge banquet of data, ideas, anecdotes, and opinions while kicking off the two-day event, which was coordinated and underwritten by The Jockey Club and the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation. Keeneland is hosting the summit.

More than 40 representatives of the Thoroughbred industry -- including veterinarians, sale company officials, breeders, owners, and trainers -- are participating. Following the public session, they divided into six working groups to discuss welfare and safety issues and to make recommendations about how to deal with problems.

"The end product will be the development of specific action plans," said Grayson Foundation president Ed Bowen. "They might be in the form of subjects for veterinarians and researchers to pursue, the development of additional statistical matter, or a combination of both. The racehorse of today makes far fewer starts both per year and in its career than was true only a relatively few years ago. We want to know what factors account for this pattern."

Monday morning's session started with several scientific presentations. Larry Bramlage, a well-known equine surgeon, reported on a study that looked at the average years raced and average lifetime starts for North American Thoroughbreds. Horses foaled in 1965 averaged 34.76 starts and raced for 3.37 years. In comparison, horses foaled in 2000 started 16.85 times and raced for 2.64 years.

The results, which were analyzed by a statistician, didn't show that medication shortened a racehorse's career. There wasn't a "precipitous drop" in the average years raced after phenylbutazone (Bute) became widely available at the racetrack around 1965, Bramlage reported.

However, there was a statistical connection showing that the rising price of yearlings drives down the number of years raced and drives up the number of foals bred. Meanwhile the rising number of foals drives down the number of starts per foal.

"To our statistician it was a simple economic model," Bramlage said. "When a horse's second career (breeding) becomes worth more than his first career (racing), the horse switches careers,"

When the Thoroughbred auction business was thriving, the average years raced and lifetime starts declined sharply from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s. When the commercial boom ended, those statistics started rising again, but they didn't return to levels seen in earlier decades.

Dr. Rick Arthur, the equine medical director for California Horse Racing Board, discussed research showing that high percentages of horses are lost from racing due to injury and other factors. One study involved 238 2-year-old and 3-year-old Thoroughbreds in California. It began in March of 2002, and 10 months later, only 18 were still on the track and in the study. Some suffered musculoskeletal injuries that caused them to miss training for 30 days or more, some were sidelined that long for other reasons, and others left the state. Another study focused on horses in the barns of three different trainers,

"Our horses have a half-life of only about 12 months in California, and they only last in horse racing about 18 months," Arthur said. Results were similar for a group of New York horses. California loses about 3% of its racehorse population each month, Arthur added.

The veterinarian also discussed evidence that a higher percentage of female Thoroughbreds per crop are going to the breeding shed, which "takes away a lot of selective pressures" in breeding. In addition, Arthur mentioned sales of 2-year-olds in training, saying there "isn't a lot of indication" that they are involved in shortening horses' racing careers. Another issue addressed by Arthur was the increasing intensity, or speed, of pre-race workouts.

Dr. Sue Stover presented sobering information from the California Horse Racing board's postmortem program that conducts autopsies on every horse that dies on the racetrack.

"Despite increases in knowledge, the number of fatalities has increased," said Stover, who described the magnitude of the problem as "huge."

By Stover's conservative estimate, evidence showing a relation to pre-existing damage (stress fractures) was found in more than 95% of the equine bones (examined in the postmortem program) that had complete fractures. The damage set up the horses for their injuries.

Dr. Wayne McIlwraith discussed joint trauma and osteoarthritis while Dr. Michael "Mick" Peterson spoke about using high-tech equipment and techniques such as a robotic hoof tester and ground penetrating radar to improve racing surfaces.

Monday's program also included three panel discussions. Participants and their comments included the following:

Nick Nicholson, Keeneland president: "We, as an industry, should work together to deal with these questions so that we're taking the actions that we can. I thought Dr. Stover made a great point that we have identified areas we can do something about and then, as an industry, work to make it more of a priority to do those. Certainly racing surfaces would be the shining example right now. But if I could give an example on the other side, we've known about Dr. Stover's research on horse shoes (toe grabs) for years and years and years, and yet, we as an industry, have been slow to react to that. I think we need to do better about taking the information in the academic area and then turning it into constructive action as an industry."

Rollin Baugh, California bloodstock agent: "The use of Bute and Lasix, I understand, and I know about the benefits of them to the horse. But it doesn't give us a public relations platform to stand on that's very good. I think the faster we work toward less medication, the better off we'll all be. "

Richard Mandella, Hall of Fame trainer: "The month between races has become very fashionable. I think a lot of it is mental on the trainers' and owners' part. I know when I was a teen-ager I broke a lot of yearlings, and the mental capabilities or capacity of the horse today, I would say, were not as strong as when I was a kid. And that was in the late '60s, early '70s. It's not just physical why we can't run them back within the month. It's because, as Rick Arthur pointed out, we have some great workouts in between those races. But you'll see us do that and not take them over and run them. It seems like horses are drained more out of races than they were when I started training even 30-some years ago. I think a lot of the problem in this industry is lack of education on the people's part. Back 40 years ago, 50 years ago, people worked with horses, and it was not uncommon. If you needed somebody at the racetrack, there were people available that had experience. When you go to find somebody to work at the track nowadays, you have a pretty strange group to pull from. Those mistakes made in the growing up part (with horses) are detrimental to the end product."

John Ward, trainer: "Technology has improved. Every horse in a race is more competitive than it used to be. I think the horse has not evolved over the last 100 years very much at all, but our training techniques and what we're able to get the athlete in his performance to give us has increased greatly. As a result of it, we're seeing more loading, more stress fractures, more problems with the skeletal structure of an animal. Therefore, I feel that we have turned the heat up on these animals, and what we have to do now is to recognize the danger signs and be able to move back away from them when we see those danger signs. We've got the science now, and we've got to disseminate the science down the ladder to our younger trainers and to our assistant trainers and start giving them confidence in recognizing problems before they happen."

Bill Casner, co-owner of WinStar Farm, chairman of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association: "One of our problems is that we have interrupted natural selection. We used to select for a much stronger horse. The economics of our day and age have changed the way we breed our horses. At an earlier time, a horse had to earn its way to the breeding shed. Durability was certainly one of those things that was selected for. Stallions would run until they were five or six years old. They would have a tremendous number of starts. The economics at that time dictated that racing was where you made the money. The second life (breeding) was not nearly as valuable at that time as it is now. There weren't a lot of horses that were sold. The economics now, sales dictate breeding decisions. When matings are planned, one of the big questions is 'Is she going to give you a pretty baby? Is this mating going to give you a good-looking horse?' It's a beauty contest out there. The question is never asked 'Is this mating going to give you a more durable horse? Is this horse going to be able to run for several years?' As you know, as soon as a horse proves himself on the racetrack, he goes to the breeding shed."

Dr. Tom Brokken, president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners: "There are a lot of factors in what's happening in the horse industry. But the No. 1 factor, I believe, is the almighty dollar. And that has really hurt us in the health of

the horse. In the early days when I first started working on the track, all the horses were usually broken in September, and they continued training all the way until they came to the racetrack sometime in May, maybe June. They then went right on and a lot was not expected of them early in that 2-year-old year. It wasn't expected by the trainers; it wasn't expected by the owners. They weren't supposed to be making a lot of money. There weren't a lot of races, really, for 2-year-olds that were worth a lot of money at that time. They used to run 2-year-olds at Hialeah early in their careers. The dollar thing has changed how we manage a horse now, how we train him, how much time he has off. The value of the land, the value of the horse, the value of everything that goes into it ... The racetrack has to make money. The trainer has to make money. The owner has to make money. Everybody is concerned about the dollar, and that has affected the horse and welfare of the horse."