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## Inside Track: Safety First

by -

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*by Erin Nuckols*

**Art Gray, inventor of Sure Reins**

Photo: Art Gray

In 1986, Art Gray watched one of his closest friends—driver William “Billy” Haughton—die due to injuries suffered in a harness racing collision at Yonkers Raceway. The accident


happened about two months after another driver, Dave Dunckley, was killed at Roosevelt Raceway in a similar type of accident.

Gray, a former assistant Standardbred trainer, was a steward at Roosevelt when Haughton’s accident occurred. He was well aware of the dangers of any sport involving speed and horses, having grown up in Long Island, N.Y., near the track.

“I was always interested in safety, and putting the extra time in at the track to make sure everything was good,” said Gray.

For the last decade, Gray has been perfecting and promoting The Sure Line’s reins. The product is designed to help riders of Thoroughbreds and Standardbred drivers, because with broken reins, “It’s like being in a car going 35 mph and having your steering wheel fall off,” Gray said.

The reins for Thoroughbred riders have a nylon strap extending back through to the far end of the grip away from the bit. The snap hook extends beyond the loop attached to the bit (see photo).



Gray said there is anywhere from three to six potentially deadly incidents a year. He recalled one accident in the early 1970s at Roosevelt when a line broke on a horse while being exercised. Luckily, the horse ended up going over the rail and into the infield and was unharmed, but Gray realized something needed to be done to prevent this from happening.

“I started thinking there has to be a way to put another wire or another connection or something to stop this,”

Gray said.

In 2002, Gray attended the University of Louisville Stewards Accreditation program where John Giovanni, former national manager for the Jockey's Guild, discussed the need for a better reins in Thoroughbred racing.

Giovanni then took Gray and his safety reins into the jockeys' room at Saratoga.

"Every one of them had a story about an incident of reins breaking," Gray said.

That same year, jockey Chris McCarron talked with trainer Juan "Paco" Gonzalez, about using the safety reins in the Santa Anita Derby (gr. I) on Came Home.

McCarron, a Hall of Fame jockey and founder of the North American Racing Academy near Lexington, uses safety reins in his program. Both he and Darrell Haire, California regional representative for the Jockey's Guild, have worked close with Gray to spread the need for safety reins.

"I've had three reins either break or come apart in my career and it's the most frightening thing that you can experience," said McCarron. "When you are involved in a spill, it happens so darn fast that you don't have time to be scared. When you've got a rein that's broken and a horse going 40 mph with no way of controlling it, you have all this time to think about the consequences there may be.

"(Safety reins) are a no-brainer," he continued. "This is one of those things that comes along and you say, 'man, why didn't we think about this before?'"

Eclipse Award-winning trainer Todd Pletcher has had riders who have used safety reins.

"In concept they are a good idea and anytime you can have some added safety without disrupting the weight of the reins or the rider's feel or control, it's a good thing," said Pletcher.

During the 2005 Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile (gr. I), jockey John Velazquez aboard Private Vow finished last due to a broken rein. In December 2007, Kent Desormeaux riding Premium Tap was able to come out with a win despite broken reins in Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Cup at Al Janadriah Racecourse.

Luckily, none of these jockeys were hurt. Gray wanted to prevent the possibility of serious injuries before it is too late.

"After Billy died, nobody fought the helmet rules anymore and every state harness jurisdiction made the new helmets mandatory. He had to die for that to happen," Gray said.

Gray's love for the sport and his concern for the well-being of its participants, both horse and

rider, stems from his days at Roosevelt.

“That was it, once I got involved with going over to the racetrack, I had the bug. That’s what I wanted to do,” said Gray, who attended New York’s St. John University and had his trainer’s license by the time he was out of college.

Due to respiratory problems, Gray gave up training and was offered a job as a patrol judge at just 25 years of age. A year later, he became an associate judge and steward, where he stayed until March 2006.

While a steward, Gray grew frustrated witnessing illegal operations that were out of his control.

With that thought in mind, he merged his passion for safety and racing integrity into a consulting firm called Gray & Associates Consulting in 2006.

Gray lives outside of Buffalo, N.Y. with his wife, Mary Ann, and two children, Lauren and Colin.

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