

**SPECIAL
REPORT**

In-depth analysis
of the new racing
surfaces in North America



◀ **BILL HARTACK**
Hall of Famer, five-time
Kentucky Derby winner,
dies at 74

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THE Blood-Horse

International Thoroughbred Breeding and Racing

December 8, 2007/No. 49

Synthetic Surfaces

**IS RACING ON
THE RIGHT TRACK?**



Display Through December 22
U.S. \$4.95 (CAN. \$7.95)



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THE BLOOD-HORSE

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DECEMBER 8 • 2007

VOLUME CXXXIII • NO.49

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WHAT'S Going On Here

STEP LIVELY

In 2007, at least one Thoroughbred flat race was run at 129 different racetracks in North America (another 24 ran steeplechase races only). Of those racetracks, nine now have a synthetic track surface.

This week, *The Blood-Horse* devotes an entire issue to the subject of synthetic surfaces. So, while only 7% of the 129 tracks in North America now have a non-dirt main track, the subject is deemed worthy of a complete examination by this publication.

Why?

Because, as the articles in this special edition prove, in just a few short years, the introduction of synthetic surfaces has impacted racing dramatically.

These stories document several things: synthetic surfaces, as of now, are not a magic wand; there are as many naysayers as believers; and perhaps most importantly at this juncture, there is no consensus about them within the industry.

That latter point should come as no surprise. There is no consensus about anything in this industry.

Reading the comments from breeders, owners, trainers, jockeys, veterinarians, track superintendents, handicappers, track management, etc., leaves little doubt that this is true regarding the synthetic surfaces being used at Del Mar, Santa Anita, Hollywood Park, Keeneland, Turfway Park, Golden Gate, Woodbine, Presque Isle, and Arlington Park.

Synthetic surfaces have not made track biases disappear. In some instances, they have only magnified them. There are synthetic surfaces that favor speed and those that don't. There are synthetic surfaces that produce quick times—and not necessarily by good horses—and some that don't. There are synthetic surfaces that seem to be totally different during morning training hours than they are during racing hours.

Just because it's not dirt does not mean you just put down the surface and walk away. Nearly every synthetic racing surface that has been installed has experienced maintenance issues, some obviously more than others. It goes without saying the composition of the same synthetic surface in Del Mar, Calif., and

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, must be different, and in turn will present different challenges for maintenance crews, horsemen, and the betting public.

The key question is simple: Are synthetic racing surfaces safer for the horses?

The manufacturers will say yes, but the jury is really still out.

Many of the veterinarians, owners, and trainers quoted in the articles in this issue, certainly representative of their profession, say they still see injuries in their horses that train and race over synthetic surfaces. Granted, no one should have expected injuries would cease to exist. These are, after all, still fragile animals.

Information on breakdowns is hard to discuss because in most jurisdictions, only those that happen during live races are reported, and everyone knows there are as many or more breakdowns during morning training hours.

What is known is this: synthetic surfaces are now a part of the racing landscape.

With that said, we now enter a perfect time to critically study

and scrutinize the various synthetic surfaces, because there are no concrete plans for any to be installed at other racetracks in the immediate future.

In New York, there is uncertainty over the franchise and a lack of money. Magna chief Frank Stronach has repeatedly stated he is not in favor of synthetic surfaces for the tracks the company owns (other than in California, where the installation at Santa Anita was mandated by the state). Churchill Downs, home of the world's most famous race, is not now a candidate. Most small tracks cannot afford the approximately \$10 million it takes to make the change.

So, for the immediate future, the nine aforementioned tracks will remain those in North America that have taken the bold move of replacing their traditional dirt surfaces in an attempt to improve the game in a dramatic way. In the next few years, we will know more about the impact of their decision. ■

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*The introduction
of synthetic
surfaces has
impacted racing
dramatically*

**SYNTHETIC
SURFACES**

On the **Right Track?**



Racing's grand experiment is under way

BY LENNY SHULMAN

Perhaps no other sport is as bound to tradition as racing Thoroughbreds. From the sheer length of its history, to the grand old venues in which it takes place, to the top-hatted and red-suited bugler calling the horses to post, racing loves its time-honored habits. Normally, it embraces radical changes like a child takes to Brussels sprouts.

Sure, there's a safety vest or better helmet for jockeys added here; new exotic wagers and simulcasting and bigger saddlecloth numbers there. But as for the fundamentals of how races are run, change usually arrives on the wings of a crawling glacier...pre-global warming. »

DAVE LANDRY PHOTO



It is with great difficulty, then, in this sea of tradition, to fathom the scope and rapidity of the installation of artificial, or synthetic, racing surfaces. In the past two years, nine racetracks in North America have laid down some combination of rubber, wax, sand, jelly cable, and other ingredients that would seem more apt to be headed for a recycling center than a racetrack. It is a pace that bewilders even the staunchest backers of the new surfaces.

As necessity is the mother of invention, one readily understands the genesis of this movement. Cold-weather locations such as Turfway Park in Northern Kentucky and Woodbine, near Toronto, struggled mightily, and often unsuccessfully, to keep their dirt tracks thawed and fit for winter racing, losing numerous racing dates to inclement weather, and horses to injury. Other plants, such as Arlington Park near Chicago, and Del Mar, outside San Diego, were hit with concussive negative publicity from local media for excessive catastrophic breakdowns and horse deaths in 2006. Lexington's Keeneland found its speed-favoring, rail-biased racing strip to be far below its lofty standard of "racing as it was meant to be" during its two boutique meetings each year.

Each of the above tracks, in full search mode, was willing to move forward based on the success of "all-weather" synthetic tracks in Europe. But the blockbuster came out of California, whose racing board decided to mandate that each of the state's major racetracks switch to synthetics or lose their dates. This pushed the needle past "surprise" to "astonishment," considering the limited track record of the new surfaces and the lack of data on a host of topics, ranging from how to maintain the surfaces, to their impact on the very style

of racing, crucial to a state famous for its fast strips and speedy performers.

Turfway Park became the first track in North America to race over a synthetic surface two years ago, while Golden Gate Fields is currently running its initial meet over one. Already, certain advantages have proven out. New drainage systems that allow water to drain vertically down through the material have kept venues open for normal training and race days, eliminating sloppy conditions and sealed tracks. When it does rain, and races come off the turf, those horses are able to make the transition to synthetic racing without needing to be scratched, increasing field sizes and improving handle.

But somewhere along the line, whether it came from "the glass is nearly full" manufacturers (Polytrack, Tapeta Footings, and Cushion Track surfaces have been installed in North America) or from overly-optimistic track operators, horsemen were led to believe that synthetic surfaces could cure the halt and lame, and let the blind see. The idea got out that these surfaces would eliminate catastrophic breakdowns, be the end of injuries to horses, and mark the beginning of no-maintenance-required facilities. These beliefs, belied by the past two years' experience, have caused some hard feelings from horsemen and backpedaling from purveyors.

"The expectations at the beginning were completely unreasonable," noted David Willmot, chairman and CEO of Woodbine Entertainment Group, which operates the Toronto-area track. "Everybody wanted to believe it, and no question the purveyors

of synthetic surfaces—I won't say they oversold or misrepresented—but they were certainly painting a rosy picture. Even though expectations were too high, it's still better than what we had."

Some venues have had relatively smooth skating with their artificial surfaces; others have struggled with composition, maintenance, and the vagaries of climate swings from meet to meet and even from morning to afternoon. What is apparent in speaking to operators and horsemen alike is that synthetic surfaces are still very much a work in progress. From farriers to track superintendents to trainers and jockeys, a learning curve is under way. Thankfully, cooperation and information-sharing are prevalent, and even where the growing pains have been most egregious, many believe that with trial and error will come substantial improvement, hopefully both short- and long-term.



David Willmot

FIELD SIZE MATTERS

An area that unquestionably has been a synthetic-surface success has been removing precipitation from the equation as a negative that impacts racing, field sizes, and handle. More so than the composition of the surface itself, the underlying drainage mechanisms that come with the artificial surfaces have changed the way precipitation is drained from racetracks. So-called vertical drainage pulls the water down away from the track, theoretically leaving the surface dry no matter how much rain has fallen. This prevents track superintendents from having to "seal," or roll heavy equipment, over the track in order to pack it down and keep water from penetrating beneath the surface. Horsemen do not enjoy running their charges over sealed tracks.

"It takes away the judgment calls of whether you seal or don't seal," said Nick Nicholson, president and chief executive officer of Keeneland, which is now a partner in the Polytrack business with Polytrack founder Martin Collins. "Once you seal a racetrack, it pushes a bunch of dominoes, and it's a while before it's going to be consistent again. We don't have to live with that anymore."

This has benefited horsemen in a variety of ways. First, when horses are slated to work, they are able to, thus helping keep them on their intended schedules and get them up to races with fewer glitches. This can only help field size, or the average number of starters per race, which in turn drives handle, the amount wagered on the races, upward. It is an accepted truth that more money will be wagered on races when more horses enter the starting gate.



Horses working over Turfway Park's Polytrack surface

PAT LANG

Artificial surfaces have uniformly increased field sizes across North America, although why this has occurred is subject to debate. Racetrack operators, looking to put the best possible spin on their switch to synthetic surfaces, state that increased field size is a product of horses staying healthier, thus shortening the time in between starts and allowing each horse to race more. This theory, though, is partly denied by most of the owners of sizable stables we talked to, who overwhelmingly said they had not noticed their horses coming back to races more quickly. However, if a horse stays healthy, it stands to reason it will make more starts over the course of a season.

More likely, increased field size is a product of proper drainage, and thus the lack of sloppy racing surfaces, which normally lead to a percentage of horses scratching out of off-track races. Also, now when races are taken off the turf because of excessive moisture, many more of those turf horses still compete in the race even though it takes place on the main track. This is due to a widely-held belief that turf runners take to the synthetic surfaces well, and thus there is no need to scratch turf runners when races are moved off the grass. This, combined with horses being able to stay on their planned workout schedules, has likely driven field sizes upward on synthetic surfaces.

Arlington Park saw its average field size increase from 7.14 in 2006 (pre-Polytrack) to 8.19 in 2007. Although those numbers include turf races, Arlington's main-track events saw an increase of .75 horses per race, according to vice president Kevin Greely. All-sources mutuel handle improved by some \$47 million, or 12.7%, over the same period.

Generally, racetracks putting in the new surfaces have enjoyed increased business as gamblers kick the tires trying to beat the system.

Keeneland's first Polytrack meeting, in the fall of 2006, saw a combined (main track and turf) field size improvement of more than one horse per race, and all-sources mutuel handle was up 14%. Keeneland's first spring meet on Polytrack saw a 1.67 field-size increase and an all-sources handle improvement of 11%.

Even Del Mar, whose first Polytrack meeting in 2007 saw an unusually slow main track, enjoyed a .25 increase in field size and a correspondingly small tick up in all-sources handle.

California racing figures to be the biggest benefactor of increased field sizes, because of anemic numbers over the past decade, seasonal considerations, and the artificial surfaces that now make it a much more attractive winter destination for East Coast trainers, who previously shunned sending horses out west because of Cal-

Synthetic Surfaces Timeline

- ▶ **1965** April— Tartan Track tested with six Thoroughbred trial races at Laurel Raceway, a harness track
- ▶ **1966** Nov.— First race on Tropical Park's Tartan surface
- ▶ **1971** May— Calder Race Course opens with a main track consisting of synthetic Saf-T-Turf
Sept.— Calder covers Saf-T-Turf with sand; special harrow built to keep a two-inch consistency
- ▶ **1987** Martin Collins' first Polytrack training facility installed at trainer Richard Hannon's gallop in England
- ▶ **1988** Aug.— Equitrack installed at Remington Park, a mixture of sand and oil-based polymers
- ▶ **1989** Oct.— Lingfield Park in England opens with Equitrack surface; Southwell in England opens with Fibresand
- ▶ **1991** July— Remington Park announces Equitrack will be replaced by conventional racing surface
- ▶ **1998** March— Trainer Michael Dickinson lays down his Tapeta surface at his training farm in North East, Md.
- ▶ **2001** Nov.— Lingfield Park resurfaced with Polytrack
- ▶ **2002** Newmarket opens Polytrack gallop at Long Hill
- ▶ **2003** Polytrack gallop installed at Ballydoyle in Ireland; training tracks installed for France Galop at Chantilly and Maisons-Laffitte
- ▶ **2004** Sept.— Keeneland unveils its Polytrack training track
- ▶ **2005** Sept.— Turfway Park opens fall meet with its new Polytrack surface
- ▶ **2006** Feb.— The California Horse Racing Board decides that state racing associations that operate at least four continuous weeks will be required to install a synthetic racing surface by the end of 2007 or face a loss of dates
May— The CHRHB gives final approval that all major Thoroughbred tracks in the state must install synthetic surfaces by Jan. 1, 2008
Aug.— Midway through its meeting, Woodbine becomes the second track in North America to race on a synthetic surface, unveiling its new Polytrack surface; while being installed, main track races were run on the harness track
Oct.— Keeneland opens its fall meet with its new Polytrack surface; Great Hunter wins first grade I race on a synthetic surface, the Lane's End Breeders' Futurity, the following day
Nov.— Hollywood Park opens with its new Cushion Track synthetic surface
- ▶ **2007** May— Arlington Park opens with a new Polytrack surface a year after an unprecedented string of catastrophic breakdowns
July— 42,842 are on hand at Del Mar as the Southern California track opens with its new Polytrack surface
Sept.— Presque Isle opens for business in northwest Pennsylvania with a Tapeta Footings surface
The Oak Tree meeting at Santa Anita opens, unveiling its new Cushion Track surface
Nov.— Golden Gate Fields in Northern California opens with its new Tapeta Footings racing surface
The Ocala Breeders' Sales Co. opens its one-mile training track with its new synthetic Safetrack surface



PAT LANG

ifornia's reputation for hard, fast racing surfaces. Hollywood Park enjoyed a field-size increase from 7.5 for its 2005 fall meeting (pre-synthetic) to 8.6 for the 2006 edition, and rose from 8.0 for its 2006 spring/summer meet (pre-synthetic) to 8.4 in 2007, according to Martin Panza, Hollywood Park's racing secretary.

"Between us and Santa Anita (which both installed Cushion Track), there are 800 more horses than usual on the grounds training," Panza said. "Todd Pletcher has 50+ out here; Christophe Clement has 13; Graham Motion just came out here for the first time with a string of eight. We're filling races now that didn't fill in the past, and now that we have 2-year-olds training over it, potentially we'll be keeping more of them sound and racing, which would further increase the horse population."

Ron Charles, president of Santa Anita, added that the Darley operation, which left California a couple of years ago, is coming back. "Eoin Hartly, who trains for Darley, told me he hasn't had to turn out a 2-year-old yet," said Charles. "There's not as much shin-bucking because the surface has kindness and give. The Oak Tree 2-year-old races were up dramatically in field size."

TAKING THE HEAT

The recipe for finding the correct mixture for each racetrack surface has proven considerably more elusive than anticipated. Synthetic surfaces were touted as low-maintenance alternatives to the constant tinkering that goes hand-in-hand with dirt surfaces. However, few of the tracks that have switched to artificial surfaces have been truly low-maintenance. Most have struggled with climate vacillations—temperature and moisture—and the cold-weather tracks in particular have found their first seasons with the new surfaces full of challenges and unpleasant surprises.

"For our first six or seven weeks, in August 2006, everyone was delighted except for a breakdown or two," said Willmot. "But as we got to October and cool weather, we started to see some separation of the sand away from the rubber and fiber, and the wax away from the sand. The fiber began balling up and the surface could not be compressed. It was like pushing down on a bag of feathers. We had trouble working the track, and it began behaving like a cuppy dirt track, which was not as advertised."

It wasn't until warmer weather reappeared in the summer of 2007 that Woodbine was able to rework its track, adding more wax and jelly cable to bind the sur-



TREVOR JONES

Starters per race have increased at tracks that have synthetic surfaces

face together. "Once that was done, the track performed much better," said Willmot. "Then, in the hot weather, we had to fight it from being too hard. The wax seems to get more viscous in hot weather and the track presses down, and you have to dig it up and roto-till it enough to keep some give in it. Now that the cooler weather is back, it's behaving more like it did originally, and we're happy with it now. It hasn't met all our expectations, but it's better than it was last year at this time."

Turfway Park must endure the same radical temperature swings as Woodbine, and has also had difficulty maintaining a consistent surface. Last February, in nasty winter weather, several Turfway cards were canceled. Although the track was the first in North America to race over a synthetic surface, in September 2005, the learning curve continues.

"For anybody who believes you just lay it down and let it sit, that's not the case," said Turfway president Bob Elliston. "It requires attention to the elements, especially temperature and moisture. We race in 95-degree weather with 90% humidity in September, and in five-degree weather with blowing winds in the winter, so you must take steps to anticipate what's coming and keep track of how the surface behaves. We've had to modify the surface from its original mix toward that end, laying down more of an oil-based wax" to keep the ingredients from sticking, or balling up, in horses' hooves.

"We've had some growing pains in that regard," Elliston said, "but the time and money spent tweaking the surface was worth the outcome. I continue to be a big proponent of it."

Although hardly situated in the Snow

Belt, Del Mar ran into significant difficulties with its first meet over Polytrack last summer. Because it sits in an environmentally sensitive area and is subject to stiff government regulations, Del Mar could not use jelly cable to help bind the synthetic surface. Del Mar officials also said they were told by Polytrack's Collins not to water the track, all of which led to a very slow surface, anathema to horsemen used to putting speed into their Golden State runners. The situation came to a head when trainer Bob Baffert, the dominant force at Del Mar over the past decade, pulled his horses off the grounds and sent them to Saratoga after one of his main clients, Ahmed Zayat, got into an X-rated verbal altercation with Del Mar president Joe Harper.

Del Mar experienced an unusually warm summer, with afternoon temperatures reaching into the 90s, a sizable differentiation from its cool mornings fueled by ocean breezes. This divergence in intra-day temperatures caused the racing surface to play one way during morning workouts, and quite another in the afternoon, where horses with natural speed had nothing left in the latter part of their races. Clearly, many quality horses just didn't enjoy running there. Harper acknowledged the difficulties, but did not want to alter the racetrack during the meet because the deep, loose track was proving safe for horses.

"Look, Del Mar is a track where every horse that's euthanized makes the front page of the local newspaper. Not the back page, the front page," said Harper. "We can't compromise safety; that's the issue for us. Next year we'd like to see the track get faster and stay safe. We want to bring

the morning and afternoon track conditions closer together. I respect Mr. Zayat. He wanted to run fast, and he wasn't going to run fast here last summer. I love guys like him. He buys great horses, brings great horses to the meet, and bets with both hands. I didn't do myself any favors by having him leave, but I may have done the horses a favor.

"We know the horsemen are concerned that it's too slow. We are studying how to make it faster, whether it's adding more wax and fiber or putting water on it. We're all going to school, all of us who've put these surfaces in. As time goes on and we see what we can and can't do, we'll get it to where it is comfortable for everybody."

Santa Anita, which ran its first meet over the Cushion Track this fall, experienced problems during a moderate rainfall just before the meet opened. Instead of draining, the rain pooled up on the track. Santa Anita closed its track to training horses Dec. 3 because it still was not draining properly. They are digging up the surface in an attempt to fix the drainage system.

While maintenance costs have decreased for venues with synthetic surfaces due to fewer heavy-machine and water-truck trips over the tracks, the amount of such savings varied. Turfway's Elliston said his track has realized a 59% reduction in maintenance costs, while Steve Sexton, vice president of Churchill Downs Inc., which owns Arlington Park, said the savings at that track, while appreciated, have "not moved the needle" an astonishing amount.

THE BREAKDOWN ON BREAKDOWNS

Injuries to horses are undoubtedly the main reason for the arrival of synthetic surfaces on the racing scene. Owners who have invested small fortunes on equine athletes are tired of seeing them recuperating instead of running. As animal-rights organizations garner more headlines, racetracks don't need the negative publicity associated with breakdowns. And the sport can't afford to lose any fans who come out for a nice day at the races only to witness the horror of a catastrophic injury occurring in front of the grandstand.

Injuries are a fact of life in any sport. When was the last time you watched a football game where a player didn't limp off the field or wasn't carted off to the locker room for X-rays? Yet, when an animal has to be vanned off the race-track, it seems much worse, somehow.

Injuries in horse racing can be difficult to quantify. Even figures for catastrophic inju-

ries, which result in the death of a horse, can be tough to trace. Most racetracks officially report only deaths that take place during racing programs. That leaves out morning training hours, when the vast majority of breakdowns take place. So, officially-reported numbers do not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground.

Likewise, many catastrophic injuries have nothing to do with the racing surface. They can occur as a result of two horses clipping heels, or from a horse flipping over in the paddock. With few exceptions, those being racetracks with bad spots where horses repeatedly injure themselves, the racing surface probably receives too much blame for breakdowns, and too much credit for the lack of them. In fact, many horsemen believe that the biggest value in installing new surfaces is the fact that racetracks had to tear up their old layouts and put in new bases and underlayers. They say that this, more than whatever surface is applied back to the top, is the most important factor in minimizing injuries.

As far as non-catastrophic injuries over the synthetic surfaces, horsemen are in near-unanimous agreement that they are seeing fewer bone chips and foot-related problems, but that injuries have moved higher up on their horses' bodies. Hips, shoulders, and necks, areas where problems were relatively rare, are more apt to be hurt in horses going over the synthetics. The horses' concussion on these surfaces is different, with less slippage to each step than over dirt surfaces.

"The horsemen's experience is that the concussion, the jarring, has moved from the lower limbs to the upper limbs," said Sue Leslie, a trainer based at Woodbine and president of the local chapter of the Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective As-

sociation. "We're trying to do studies and figure out what's causing the transfer of concussion, and how we can change it."

So, have synthetic surfaces lived up to the hype?

Thus far, no, because in many cases, the hype was off the charts.

"Somehow it got out there that these tracks were so good they could make a sore horse sound," said Woodbine's Willmot. "And worse, in the case of morning breakdowns, that they could make a lame horse sound. Perhaps some of the morning catastrophic breakdowns come from horses that shouldn't be out there, anyway."

Woodbine has reason to be sensitive about the difference between workout and racing breakdowns. Willmot points to the fact that Woodbine has not had a catastrophic breakdown during a race since June, and that encompasses a lot of racing. The official breakdowns for the track are impressive at first blush—only four fatal breakdowns recorded during main track races for 2006, and just two thus far in 2007.

All equine fatalities from Woodbine are taken to the University of Guelph for a necropsy study. A person familiar with the Guelph program, who did not want to be identified, maintained that 31 Thoroughbred fatalities from Woodbine in 2006 were involved in the necropsy study. Even accounting for turf accidents and the fact the new surface wasn't open for training until the summer, the source said the overwhelming majority of fatalities happened on the Polytrack. To underline the point, the source said that so far in 2007, 38 Thoroughbred fatalities from Woodbine were part of the Guelph study. These numbers are obviously a far cry from the official racing breakdowns.

Catastrophic Breakdowns During Racing (dirt tracks/Polytrack)	
Woodbine	
2005	5 - main track
2006	4 - Polytrack
2007	2 - Polytrack
Arlington	
2002	10 - main track
2003	27 - main track
2004	13 - main track
2005	8 - main track
2006	22 - main track
2007	13 - Polytrack
Del Mar	
2006	8 - main track
2007	2 - Polytrack
Turfway	
2005 (all meets)	14 - main track
2005-2006	3 - Polytrack
2006 (fall and holiday)	7 - Polytrack
2006-2007	7 - Polytrack
Keeneland	
2005 (fall)	2 - main track
2006 (spring)	2 - main track
2006 (fall)	0 - Polytrack
2007 (spring)	0 - Polytrack
2007 (fall)	4 - Polytrack

Fastest Times Dirt/Synthetic														
Furlongs	5		6		7		8		8.5		9		10	
Surface	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S
Arlington	:57.20	:56.51	1:08.00	1:08.84	1:20.40	1:21.02	1:32.20	1:33.72	1:41.40	1:41.49	1:46.20	1:49.30	1:59.40	2:07.51
Del Mar	:56.40	-	1:07.06	1:11.06	1:20.00	1:23.57	1:33.20	1:39.14	1:40.00	1:45.39	1:46.00	1:54.86	1:59.11	2:07.29
Hollywood	:56.29	:57.91	1:07.52	1:07.79	1:19.97	1:21.22	1:32.60	-	1:40.00	1:41.61	1:45.35	1:47.88	1:58.40	2:03.21
Keeneland	-	-	1:07.78	1:08.30	1:20.39	1:21.05	-	-	1:40.80	1:41.70	1:46.78	1:47.97	2:02.21	2:05.02
Oak Tree	:57.78	-	1:07.20	1:07.34	1:20.00	1:20.90	1:33.40	1:34.60	1:39.18	1:40.38	1:45.80	1:46.93	1:57.80	2:02.14
Turfway	:56.93	:57.23	1:07.97	1:08.40	-	-	1:34.12	1:35.61	1:40.73	1:42.52	1:46.70	1:48.29	2:03.82	2:05.75
Woodbine	:55.95	:57.08	1:08.05	1:08.56	1:20.49	1:20.54	1:33.40	-	1:40.80	1:42.46	1:48.00	1:49.55	2:01.00	2:03.51

SOURCE: EQUIBASE COMPANY

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

“This is a work in progress, but one that is going in the right direction,” Willmot said. “We’re learning more about it, and it’s been a real challenge. Some horsemen here will say I’m full of crap, because they’ve had their own individual experiences. Would they have had those same experiences with the old dirt track? I think it would have been worse.”

Woodbine is not alone in its mixed results. Arlington Park, which has not had to tinker with its surface since laying it down, improved its catastrophic breakdown numbers over the disastrous year it had in 2006, when 22 horses suffered breakdowns on the dirt track. However, the 13 Polytrack breakdowns in 2007, while representing improvement, was the same number that broke down over the dirt track in 2004, and was more than the number of main-track breakdowns in both 2005 and 2002.

After having no fatal breakdowns in its first two meets over Polytrack, Keeneland experienced four during its 2007 fall meeting, or equal to the number of breakdowns it saw in total from its 2005 fall and 2006 spring meetings over dirt. California racetracks have seen improvement in their breakdown numbers with synthetic surfaces, particularly Del Mar, which rebounded from its horrific 2006



COURTESY HOLLYWOOD PARK AND EQUESTRIAN SURFACES

All synthetic surface tracks have extensive drainage systems

meet of eight breakdowns to record only two in 2007. Hollywood Park improved from seven catastrophic breakdowns in its 2006 spring/summer on its dirt track to four on the Cushion Track in 2007. Santa Anita saw one catastrophic breakdown during Cushion Track racing at its fall Oak Tree meet in 2007, plus four more during training hours.

Said Turfway’s Elliston, “Without question, breakdowns are down since we put in Polytrack, as is the blood pressure of the racetrack’s president.”

Keeneland’s Nicholson stressed that his track was undertaking an effort to look “at every single ambulance run, the conditions, the location, and all the variables. One of the things we’ve learned is that you never stop learning. We have to be careful as an industry that we don’t try and stretch the limits of synthetic surfaces to where trainers keep horses in training longer than they would have. They’re so much safer that they can almost lull you into a false sense of security.”

Encouragingly, racetracks are fully co-

Average Starters Per Race

Track	Meet Before Polytrack	Meet with Polytrack
Arlington	7.14	8.19
Del Mar	8.57	8.82
Keeneland (spring)	7.81	9.48
Keeneland (fall)	9.14	10.18
Turfway (winter/spring)	8.18	8.33
Turfway (fall)	8.48	8.68
*Woodbine	7.97	8.78

* SEPT-OCT '05, SEPT-OCT '06 FIGURES ONLY

Average Lengths Separating Field at Finish

Track	Meet Before Polytrack	Meet with Polytrack
Arlington	19.21	17.98
Del Mar	21.93	18.48
Keeneland (spring)	29.71	17.15
Keeneland (fall)	29.4	16.42
Turfway (winter/spring)	25.08	22.61
Turfway (fall)	n/a	23.52
*Woodbine	18.55	17.6

* SEPT-OCT '05, SEPT-OCT '06 FIGURES ONLY

Average Winner's Lengths Ahead at the Finish

Track	Meet Before Polytrack	Meet with Polytrack
Arlington	2.6	2.04
Del Mar	2.3	1.89
Keeneland (spring)	4.33	1.32
Keeneland (fall)	3.86	1.63
Turfway (winter/spring)	2.93	2.42
Turfway (fall)	n/a	2.46
*Woodbine	2.43	2.06

* SEPT-OCT '05, SEPT-OCT '06 FIGURES ONLY

Dirt Huggers

Here is what officials at racetracks with traditional dirt surfaces have to say about installing synthetic surfaces in the future.

DAVID LONGINOTTI, assistant general manager, Oaklawn Park

We follow all trends in racing, and we’re looking at that closely as well. From our standpoint, we position ourselves as one of the premier tracks to get your horses ready for the Triple Crown. Since that’s still run on dirt, so do we.

My first job in racing was at Remington Park with Equitrack. If this stuff does what it’s supposed to do, it’s great for racing. But there are problems when you make drastic changes. We’re monitoring it as best we can, but our main focus is to have the best dirt racing and best dirt track possible for now and into the foreseeable future.

STEVE DUNCKER, chairman, New York Racing Association

Well, with the funding uncertainty now, we’re not in a position to take action on that. But if the right circumstances were to present themselves, I think we’d be interested in a synthetic surface for Aqueduct, and for the training track at Belmont. Those are the two entities we would be interested in synthetics for in the short term.

RANDY SAMPSON, president, Canterbury Park

Number one, I, like other track managers, am certainly watching with great interest the developments of the last few years, and I hope it turns out to be the greatest thing for keeping horses sound and does all the things people promised it would. That would be great. The rush to install them has been somewhat surprising to me, and while I’m watching it, I want to see it play out over a longer period of time and see more data and get more feedback from horsemen. I don’t see us doing it anytime soon. We have a relatively short summer meet. An all-weather area would have more urgency in terms of salvaging race days you would have lost.

I think it’s amazing they’ve rushed to put them in because they’re still experimenting with the maintenance, the water, trying this and that. You’d think those bugs would have been worked out in the testing phases at the training centers before people started spending \$8 or \$10 million to put them down at some of the top racetracks in the world. >>>

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

operating with each other as to what they're trying, and what has been working, as far as maintaining their surfaces and minimizing injuries. Officials all stress the newness of this venture, and the ongoing learning experience. They feel that even one year from now, the artificial surfaces will have improved markedly in their performance. If anything, they have been surprised by the surfaces' wide-scale use. The California mandate that has now accounted for four of the nine synthetic racing surfaces in North America was unexpected, and vaulted the new surfaces from the experimental phase to full-blown usage.

"We felt it would be a four- or five-year thing before the rest of the industry came along with us in this dramatic change in racing," Nicholson said. "We were confident in this as a long-term decision, but we expected to be out on the limb by ourselves for years. We wanted to play a role in giving the industry a laboratory. If it worked, great. And if it didn't, we could learn from it with openness and transparency."

TIMES ARE CHANGING

With racetracks finding the right mix of materials for their synthetic surfaces, race times are more closely approximating what they were on dirt. The chart on page 6979 shows that most times for most distances are within one second of where they used to be before the advent of synthetics. Del Mar, which will have to wait until next July to see if its adjustments bear fruit, is the glaring exception. Sprints and middle-distances in 2007 there were consistently two-to-three seconds slower than previously, and the 10-furlong Pacific Classic (gr. I) was run a full five seconds slower than in earlier years.

Perhaps the reaction to the Del Mar meet—that speed was dead as an attribute of the Thoroughbred breed—was overwrought. But there certainly was truth to the opinion that racing there seemed to lack the sizzle of previous summers. Hopefully, synthetic surfaces can help the breed move forward more than it necessitates changes to it.

"There are two spectrums that are equally important," said John Sikura, a breeder/owner who owns Hill 'n' Dale Farms near Lexington. "One is the safety and welfare of the horse; the second is the integrity of the breed. I'm not opposed to any type of surface that can achieve those two objectives. But to say, 'It rained at Monmouth Park for the Breeders' Cup, so every racetrack in America has to put in a synthetic surface,' that is not based on science or fact.

"When you purport to do something as sweeping as changing the playing field of the game, you better do that with a lot of thought and evidence. You have to get it right." 🐾

Dirt Huggers (continued)

BOB CASSANESE, vice president of operations, Tampa Bay Downs

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Our surface falls into that category. Our history on the surface speaks for itself. It's been a safe, consistent, bias-free running surface. Our number-one goal is a safe running surface, and we've had phenomenal breakdown ratios. We haven't explored, other than conversations, anything with synthetic surfaces.

Our times are compatible with other tracks depending on the quality of the horse.

FRANK STRONACH, chairman of Magna Entertainment (Gulfstream, Laurel Park, Pimlico, Lone Star)

I will go out of my way to have a safe racetrack, no matter what it is made of. But I'm a little skeptical. I'm not sure synthetic surfaces are the answer. The materials seem to fluctuate with the sun, with cold, and with rain. You can't completely control it. I think sand and dirt have been proven over thousands of years, and are a more natural footing.

I don't want to be too critical, but I think we should pause for a while and look at the problems caused by different climates. My inclination is to leave things as natural as possible.

The key is to have a good base. Gulfstream Park was built on swampy land, and when we rebuilt it, we put in four feet of lime rock. We created a base like a highway, driving trucks over it again and again until there was no give. Only then did we put the cushion on it. If there is even a small amount of give, the water accumulates there, it gets soggy, and when the horses go over it, you have a problem. We did the same at Laurel Park. If everyone would do that, I don't think we would need synthetic surfaces. What we did was more costly than installing a synthetic surface. But we spend millions on horses, so I feel that's what should be done.

BOB KULINA, general manager, Monmouth Park

We committed to a dirt surface for the Breeders' Cup, and nobody three years ago was ready to jump into synthetic. Nobody thought it would go as quickly as it's gone, with California going with it. We're satisfied with what we have, but if synthetic becomes the thing that changes the game, we would look at it. If it leads to a safer product, that's good, but there are lots of unanswered questions. What's the life expectancy of the materials? How do you refurbish the material? What are the proper grooming techniques? What will it do in New Jersey in the summer when it's 95 degrees? Remington had trouble with its surface when it got hot. So we're going to wait and see and learn.

From a gambler's perspective, does it take an exciting variable away from the game? Training methods might change. Do we breed away from speed toward stamina? Time will tell on these things. We may see a hybrid of what we have now in terms of these surfaces.

As an operator you're intrigued by saving money on maintenance, but some of these claims may or may not be true. If you're an eastern track or in a snow zone, what happens when you plow the snow off—how much material comes off?

It might take a decade for things to get resolved. What NYRA and Churchill do will have a big effect.

STEVE SEXTON, president of Churchill Downs and executive vice president of Churchill Downs Inc. (Churchill Downs, Calder, Fair Grounds)

We have fair and safe track surfaces, based on horsemen's feedback. They love it, and love how the horses do over it. We have a fine sand that, because of the climactic conditions in New Orleans and Louisville, has been very responsive to the safety of the horses. Catastrophic injury rates at those two facilities have been as good as any in the country. Those surfaces continue to receive kudos, even after the installation of artificial surfaces elsewhere. Our horsemen have continued to tell us they love those track surfaces, and in many cases tell us, 'Please don't change.'

At Calder in South Florida, we've also gotten positive feedback on our surface. Granted, it's a different surface because it rains so much, but we're really pleased with those three surfaces we have. That said, if there was an opportunity to have a safer surface, we're certainly going to take a hard look at it. But we'll stand by our statistics next to anyone with an artificial surface. I think the jury is still out on artificial surfaces.

It's premature to assess them and say they are the panacea of the industry. Maybe they will, over time, prove to be safer surfaces, but we don't know that today.

As far as the tradition of the Kentucky Derby, tradition does not supersede safety. We have proven over the years that we have a safe track, and that is at the top of the list, be it tradition or not. Safety is of the utmost importance, and the Derby has been a safe race through the years.

Compiled by Lenny Shulman

Owning Up

BY LENNY SHULMAN

Most owners are pleased, but injuries, starts, and bills remain largely unchanged

In the food chain of Thoroughbred racing, it is the owners who ultimately buy the horses, pay the bills, and stiffen up when they see incoming calls from their trainers, which can often signal bad news for their investments. So, if you promise this group relief through fewer injuries, cheaper vet bills, and more starts per horse via synthetic surfaces, they are more than happy to sign on. After a year or two of reality on the new surfaces, however, their reaction to the wax, silica, rubber, and jelly cable is mixed.

While most have experienced fewer catastrophic breakdowns, all report plenty of injuries still, and no relief as far as vet bills go. Most are cautiously optimistic that as time goes on and racetracks and trainers gain more knowledge of what they need to do with these surfaces, results will improve. But they are concerned with several ongoing issues, such as consistency from one track to another and even intra-day consistency with the same surface; confidence they can spot a horse on a track they know the horse likes; safety of running in inclement weather on any type of surface; whether such surfaces change the sport in unanticipated ways; and whether composition of the surface is as important as the base underneath it.

"I have not noticed my horses being able to race more frequently, and they've had as many injuries as they had before," stated J. Paul Reddam, whose premium



J. Paul Reddam

stable is based in California. "I think what makes it more difficult is the wear and tear these tracks get in the mornings; they need to be kept more consistent and uniform. Del Mar and Santa Anita, for instance, are radically differ-

ent. There's no doubt they're still tinkering with the surfaces."

Scott Guenther, who races as Desperado Stables, had so many horses injured in California that he moved most of his stock to New York, Kentucky, and Chicago several years ago. He still runs Cal-breds in California, and will increase his West Coast stable should the synthetic surfaces prove kinder to horses.

"I can't tell you why the tracks back east, or the training methods, are better, but I don't get those ugly, early-morning phone calls like I did in California," said Guenther. "I just couldn't take it anymore.



Scott Guenther

"I think it's too early to draw conclusions, but the consensus among my trainers is that the synthetic surfaces have been a positive. Having said that, there have been blips along the way at the Southern California tracks; there's a learning curve going on. The vet bills are the same. We've become an industry that believes we need to do so much to these animals to keep them happy and healthy that it's become a way of life.

"Generally, I believe we tend to give too much credit and importance to the composition of the surface. More to the point, tracks like Del Mar and Santa Anita had bad spots in them; the real beauty of synthetic surfaces is they had to go down and start from scratch, taking the tracks down to nothing and laying in new bases, new pads, and a new cushion. That would have vastly improved these tracks no matter what the surface. I think you get the consistency from re-doing the base, with less credit going to the composition of the surface."

Marty Wygod, California's leading

breeder this year and also a major owner, agreed with Guenther. "Fatalities look like they're down slightly, but that could be because they've put in new bases for the first time in 30 years," said Wygod. "Dirt could be doing just as well. There had to be a change, because the number of breakdowns was getting out of control. Is racing better as a result of synthetic surfaces? Perhaps for the bad-legged and cheaper horses, but not for the top-end ones. That's a big challenge here, because owners of those horses might say, 'The hell with it, I'm going to the East Coast.'"

Horsemen had been unhappy with the surface at Woodbine near Toronto before that facility put in a Polytrack surface in 2006. But variations in weather caused problems during the initial meet run over the new surface. Said Tammy Samuel-Balaz, who runs Sam-Son Farms, "We're having some growing pains at Wood-



Tammy Samuel-Balaz

bine. We go from cold temperatures to hot, and it's a difficult situation. We've had a lot of injuries—not catastrophic—but more unusual injuries in stifles and shoulders and backs, things we don't usually see. This year the track has made adjustments and we've had less injuries.

"It's not perfect—you can't expect a new surface to be perfect—but I think it's safer than the dirt track was. It hasn't been as straightforward and simple as we may have hoped, but I'm optimistic that as they learn how to maintain it, we'll get where we need to be. I really believe in the synthetic surface once it's set up well."

Lauri Kenny, who is the farm manager at Gus Schickedanz' Schonberg Farm north of Toronto, has not been impressed with the new Woodbine surface. Half of the 16 horses Schickedanz raced at Woodbine have broken down this year, according to Kenny, with one fatality and two career-ending injuries.

"In a normal year, with more than 20 in training, two breakdowns would be a lot," said Kenny. "We've had very few fatal breakdowns historically. I think you'd have to go back to Woodcarver in the 1999 Queen's Plate for our last one. Frankly, I wish they'd go back to the dirt."

Maggi Moss, the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association Owner of the Year for 2006, is an Iowa-based attorney who races at 15 tracks from coast to coast. She was one of the decision-makers as to whether to install a synthetic surface at Prairie Meadows in Iowa, which has had problems with breakdowns.

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Race times at Del Mar since the installation of Polytrack are markedly slower

"I'm not a believer that there's a big difference between dirt and synthetics," she noted. "The majority of my string trains on dirt at Churchill Downs, and I haven't had an injury there since March. We're at Fair Grounds; no problems. I like fast horses that can use their speed, and you're not seeing that on synthetic tracks. The jury is still out as far as what's safer, as far as I'm concerned. It goes to the type of surface, the maintenance, the weather, and the type of horse you're running. That's what we told the racing commission here in Iowa—why spend \$10 million when the jury is still out? Just dig up the surface, put in a new base, and stick with dirt. That's what happened, and I'm thrilled with that decision.



Maggi Moss

"The biggest problem I have is it's difficult to determine where to run horses. Some like it; some don't. You have to figure out whether to claim certain horses. It's a puzzle, like learning a new language. It's the most interesting challenge I've had since I've been in the business.

"I had one horse who did not run well on the Polytrack at Arlington, and I nearly gave him away. But I sent him to dirt tracks, and he ran the two best races of his life. Thank goodness I kept him, but those are the challenges I have with synthetic tracks."

Although Wygod enjoyed a strong meet at Del Mar last summer, he was concerned with how many top horses failed to run well over the Polytrack surface there.

"You're running a mile in 1:41, and a Pacific Classic (gr. I) where horses can't finish. That is not racing," he stated.

As slow as Del Mar played, the recently concluded Oak Tree at Santa Anita meet, run over Cushion Track for the first time, yielded far different results. Times were unusually fast, even compared to the old dirt surface there. "I had a maiden get beat going 6½ furlongs in 1:14.1," said Reddam. "That's an extremely fast race, and I figured she'd get a speed number in the 90s. It was 77. I mean, how much faster was she supposed to go? To get a good speed figure, she would have had to set a world record."

Kentucky-based breeder/owner Bobby Trussell races horses across North America, reporting that his trainers feel the horses come out of synthetic-surface races better than they do from dirt racing.

"They feel it's an easier surface on them," Trussell said. "I have a couple of horses with conformation issues, and my feeling is they should only train and race on synthetic surfaces. Training is more important—that's 30 days a month as opposed to racing one day."

Trussell also races a significant amount in Europe, and feels a component enjoyed by trainers across the pond is missing here.

"The big difference is they train on Polytrack on straightaways in England and Ireland, and I think we're still behind as far as that goes here. My trainer in England has never even heard of hind-leg suspensory injuries, which



Bobby Trussell

now seem to be an issue on synthetic surfaces here. Why we don't alternate training clockwise and counter-clockwise here is beyond me. It's like lifting weights and having 15 pounds in one hand and five in the other. After a while, you're going to be tilting."

Despite seeing no increase in starts per runner or decrease in vet bills, California-based owner Bob Bone is happy from his experiences with the synthetic surfaces.



Bob Bone

"I've seen less injuries," Bone said, "and I think it will improve from here. We're still in the learning stage. Plus, if you get bad weather, you don't have to worry as much. Grass horses can run instead of scratching. Look, they're still animals and

they're going to have issues, but I've definitely had less breakdowns than in the past couple of years before they were installed."

Pablo Suarez, who raced 2006 champion sprinter Thor's Echo, added, "Some of the 2-year-old problems, like shins, still happen. But our horses are bouncing back out of the races a lot better, and they're able to run back a little sooner than before. We have less injuries, and I think it's better for horses and the game. There are some kinks that need to be worked out; nothing is perfect right off the bat. But as long as everyone is running on the same thing, even if it's too slow or too fast, if the horses come out of it better and with less problems, it's good." □

BENOT & ASSOCIATES

PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT, WALLY SKALIJ AND MATT GOINS

Right Direction

BY AMANDA H. DUCKWORTH

Racetrack vets see fewer catastrophic injuries, but more hind-end problems

One of the strongest arguments in favor of switching from dirt to synthetic tracks has been that artificial surfaces are safer for the horses. But while tracks are reporting that catastrophic breakdowns have been reduced, several new concerns have popped up.

Although horses are not breaking down in the afternoon, questions have arisen regarding other injuries suffered by the equine athletes. Some of the people in the best position to address these new concerns are the racetrack veterinarians that treat the horses, and most seem to agree that although synthetic surfaces haven't been the cure-all some hoped they would be, in general, they are safer.

"As far as synthetic surfaces in general, I think they are definitely headed in the right direction," said Dr. Vince Baker, who practices in California. "We have far less concussive injuries, far less chips, far less acute fractures, and condylar fractures are way down.

"At all three tracks (Del Mar, Santa Anita, and Hollywood Park) we have an equine hospital, and there is an X-ray room where we sign them up. At any given time (in the past), the board would probably be filled for that day and half of the next day. Now, if I need an X-ray done that afternoon, the board is wide open."

Dr. Steve Allday, whose experience with synthetic surfaces mainly comes at Keeneland, echoed those sentiments, saying: "I personally believe that we are not having



Dr. Steve Allday

the catastrophic, life-ending injuries that we have had in the past. I think percentage-wise it is certainly going to be lower than what we had when we had straight dirt surfaces. I have seen fewer horses have time off or need

time off from chronic injuries."

While career-ending injuries are down, veterinarians tend to agree that injuries "dirt" horses did not usually suffer in the past are becoming more common, specifically referring to an increase in hind-end injuries in many cases.

"The injuries we are seeing are hind end," said Dr. Brian Van Are, who practices in Toronto, near where Woodbine Racecourse has installed a Polytrack surface. "We are seeing a lot more tibia fractures than we have seen before, and we are seeing hind-end condylars, which we didn't have as many of before. We have fewer injuries up front, but we have a lot more back soreness.

"It is just different types of injuries, and we are also seeing stranger injuries. It is not so much just the straight chip fractures we have had before. I don't think we have had as many career-ending injuries as we had before, and it is a lot easier to come back from a hind-end injury with a Thoroughbred than it would be for a Standardbred. With front-end injuries, it is harder to come back."

Dr. Rick Arthur, who is the equine medical director of the California Horse Racing Board, concurred, saying: "I do keep in close contact with the practicing veterinarians about what is going on, and there are some concerns with some hind-end unsoundness. But it is kind of indefinite, and it kind of changes from horse to horse."

"There really isn't one overwhelming injury that you would say, 'Hey, this is related to synthetic surfaces,'" said Kentucky veterinarian Dr. John Piehowicz. "I can say I see a little more pressure in the hock. I see some minor soft-tissue injuries—sprains

and sprains of suspensory ligaments and tendons.

"Soft tissue (injury) is something that is a new addition in the last couple years that may be related to synthetic surfaces. But it may be related to the fact that we are not seeing the overwhelming injuries that we have seen before, so we are paying more attention to smaller things."

Veterinarians seem to agree that horses are suffering from a wider variety of injuries due to a multitude of reasons. One key factor is that training on synthetic surfaces involves a learning curve for both horse and trainer.

"There was a big learning curve out here, not only as far as management of horses, but training styles that had to be adjusted as well," said Dr. Jeff Blea, who practices in California and noted he hasn't seen one particular type of injury that could be connected specifically to the new racetracks. "We don't know enough about the synthetic courses yet, and we are still learning. Injuries occur, but I don't think we can correlate them simply to a racetrack problem. They are athletes, and they do suffer injuries."

"We are in a dynamic phase of racing right now, and it is a different horse that the guys are training now than they did 25-30 years ago," Allday said. "To make such an abrupt change to a surface like this, it certainly looks like there is a bit of an adjustment to understanding exactly what is going to be the most conducive way to train them as far as what you can and can't demand of your athletes."

An important thing to keep in mind is that when horses race on synthetic surfaces, their hooves move differently than they do on dirt surfaces.

"We do see more turf-like injuries," Baker said. "If you think about the synthetic surfaces, there is not as much ability for the horse's foot to move laterally or medially as far as torque or torsion-type injuries. We see more of those on the main track surface than we normally would. We are talking about a small percentage, but I have had more turf-like injuries."

Van Are also proposed the idea that in addition to having to learn how to train on different surfaces, perhaps the horses currently racing on them aren't bred for the surfaces.

"They definitely use themselves differently on this, and they have to use their hind end a lot more," he said. "You are going to need a horse with a stronger hind end now than you did before. Are



Dr. John Piehowicz

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we breeding Thoroughbreds that are weaker behind because they didn't need to be stronger behind? Is that a process that has been going on for years? It is quite possible."

Another Toronto veterinarian, who wished to remain anonymous, voiced concerns over the type of injuries that are now appearing at Woodbine.

"Certainly this year I have seen an increase of soft-tissue injuries, mainly suspensories," the vet said. "I think when the Polytrack first went in, it was really marketed to us as this consistent, wonderful

surface that was going to decrease injuries and make fast horses faster and sore horses sound.

"It is a track surface; it is not God. I think people probably had unrealistic expectations, and maybe they trained horses that should have had a little bit more time off... thinking that the Polytrack would in some way allow those horses to continue. But, on the other hand, I think that the track has let us down in that it has been inconsistent."

The consistency of the synthetic materials from morning to afternoon is one of the

more questioned aspects of the tracks. As far as the well-being of the horse, one of the most common questions centers on the health risks involved with equines breathing in the synthetic fibers. However, many veterinarians seem to feel that concern is unwarranted.

"I have now scoped at least 1,000 horses post-race on synthetic surfaces and have not yet seen it (racetrack material) past the arytenoids," said Piehowicz. "I have never seen it down in the trachea itself, and I think it is a misconception that it is down in the lungs. Horses do tend to cough more with it because the wax seems to make it adhere more to the back of the pharynx, and it is harder to get out of that region for them."

"When you watch the races on TV, it certainly looks like 'how in God's name do these horses and jockeys not breathe in all that material,'" said Baker. "But, with post-race and post-exercise scoping, we don't see it. I don't think there is anything affecting the respiratory tree of the horse or the human."

"I think that threat is complete garbage, to be honest," echoed Allday. "I scope an inordinately high number of athletes after performances compared to a lot of people, and we utilize a very long scope. We find a little bit of the stuff down there from the synthetic surfaces, but I don't think the incidences are any higher than with any other surface. I don't think it is nearly as bad as everyone makes it out to be."

One thing most veterinarians tend to agree on is that people need to have realistic expectations for what synthetic surfaces can and cannot do. Horses will still be hurt, and some will still suffer catastrophic injuries. However, synthetic surfaces do, in general, seem to reduce career-ending and life-threatening injuries.

"They are athletes, and they do suffer injuries," Blea said. "I think the synthetic tracks have been helpful in reducing the number and the magnitude, but they still do occur. It's not a cure-all."

"We are seeing less overall injuries, and absolutely less career-ending injuries," said Piehowicz. "In the last year I euthanized two horses at Turfway Park due to injury, and both of those were at a period last winter where the track got wet and froze and the weather was extremely cold. I have a saying for clients: 'Just because you can train doesn't mean you should train when it is extremely cold.'"

"They had to do something," Van Arem said of Woodbine's track. "At that point, they looked around, did the research, and decided that the Polytrack was the way to go. Overall, I think it has been a positive switch. I think a lot of the issues and complaints you hear are because everybody expected it to be the end-all and be-all, and I don't think you are going to find any surface like that." 🐾

Q&A with Dr. Larry Bramlage, Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital, Lexington

What are some of the physical differences between synthetic surfaces and conventional dirt surfaces?

Typically, the synthetic surfaces are about seven inches deep, as opposed to three or four inches on a normal dirt track, and they have the same material all the way down. There is better consistency and depth. The main difference is that the synthetics are grabbier, so that the foot doesn't slide as much.

What are some of the differences in types of injuries that you have been seeing since artificial racing surfaces have become a part of Thoroughbred racing?

We are seeing that horses are less prone to catastrophic injuries. In general, there have been a decrease in fractures and an increase in soft-tissue injuries. But it has been a shift, not an elimination of either. People who thought that (artificial surfaces) would totally eliminate horses from breaking down were misinformed.

Surprisingly, we are seeing a lot of foot soreness (on artificial surfaces). But we have seen catastrophic injuries markedly decrease at places like Turfway, Keeneland, and Del Mar.

What are some of the challenges that veterinarians face when assessing and comparing surfaces?

We get horses from all over, and they are racing on different surfaces all year around. For example, you may get a horse that trains at Keeneland (Polytrack), races at Churchill (dirt), and then goes to a whole new surface. There isn't always a lot of consistency.

There is no universal reporting system yet. We're just getting started on implementing that. We need studies that track injuries, but there is not a good database of information yet.

Are you of the opinion that all tracks should switch to artificial surfaces?

I would not say that yet. A wholesale switch at this point is a mistake. We have to examine all the data before we know where to go. It's too early to anoint it the surface of the future. Nobody knows yet. With more uniform data we will find that out.

The tracks that have made the switch to artificial surfaces were easily switched. Changes had to be made. But tracks (with conventional surfaces) like Churchill, Belmont, and Fair Grounds have been relatively good, so it's a mistake to switch just because it's popular right now.

I think we're doing it the right way. We're changing surfaces that needed it and we'll continue to examine the data.

By Jason Shandler



Dr. Larry Bramlage



ANNE M. EBENHARDT PHOTOS

According to Bramlage, the foot 'doesn't slide as much' with synthetic surfaces

Grazing in the Grass

BY DEIRDRE B. BILES

Breeders weigh in on stallions with turf pedigrees for new surfaces

How much synthetic racing surfaces will affect the decisions involved in breeding Thoroughbreds is subject to debate. Some breeders already are making changes in their programs; some are thinking about it; and some don't believe synthetic surfaces will drastically alter their philosophies about which stallions should cover which mares.

Ben P. Walden Jr. is the president of the Central Kentucky-based operation Hurricane Hall, where 2005 NetJets Breeders' Cup Mile (gr. IT) winner Artie Schiller entered stud last year and 2007 John Deere Breeders' Cup Turf (gr. IT) winner and probable champion English Channel will enter stud next year. The introduction of synthetic surfaces, upon which some horses with grass pedigrees have excelled, is one reason why Walden decided to stand the grass stars even though, in the past, the enthusiasm of American breeders for such stallions has been limited.

"Our decision-making as far as stallion selection goes is sort of a two-fold thing," Walden said. "One aspect involves synthetic surfaces and the increasing open-mindedness of breeders toward turf horses that didn't really exist five years ago. The other is the global aspect of the industry, and the fact that the business, to me, is far more global today than it was five or six years ago. When you go to sell yearlings, when you go to sell weanlings, when you go to sell mares covered by certain horses, there is just a much broader appetite, in my view, for grass pedigrees."

Even so, Walden did have some reservations when he finalized plans to stand Artie Schiller.

"I've got to be honest, I was a little sensitive last year when we committed to Artie Schiller," he said. "I didn't wear it on my sleeve because I was proud of the horse and it was my job to promote him accordingly. But I was a little concerned and was wondering, 'Is this going to go well?' As it turned out, it went very well. He was a very good racehorse, a very well-bred

horse, he was priced right, and all that carried him."

According to The Jockey Club, Artie Schiller covered 137 mares earlier this year. During the recent Keeneland November breeding stock sale, Walden reported that English Channel's first book "was up to 60 mares already, including our own, and I don't have any doubt that he will be full in six weeks or eight weeks."

Without synthetic surfaces, Walden said, "the appetite for Artie Schiller and English Channel would have been 50% of what we have today, if not less."

Walden is in the process of looking for a horse that is a good miler or was a talented 2-year-old in Europe to bring to this country as a stallion.



Dan Kenny

ANNE M. EBERHARDT/PHOTOS

Dan Kenny of Four Star Sales bred a mare to Artie Schiller earlier this year, something he would not have done before the introduction of synthetic surfaces.

"That was my number-one rule: no grass horses, because they had demonstrated time and time again that their offspring weren't geared toward our races," Kenny said. "I could give you a list of 100 turf horses that never made it as stallions and were well-tried. But Artie Schiller had as good a turn of foot as any horse that I've ever seen on the turf, and I bred a mare to him. I sold her, and she was well-received."

"I think synthetic surfaces will make things more interesting," Kenny continued, "and they will make the European and the American industries a little more unified than they have been in the past. Before now, it's always been one or the other, a grass horse or a dirt horse. While it's too early to tell if it (turf horses per-

forming well on synthetic surfaces) is statistically significant, my gut feeling is that synthetic surfaces provide a good, neutral playing ground."

Synthetic surfaces also are figuring into the breeding decisions of Ken Ramsey. He and his wife, Sarah, have raced such top runners as 2005 Emirates Airline Dubai World Cup (UAE-I) and 2004 Whitney Handicap (gr. I) winner Roses in May and homebred 2004 male grass champion Kitten's Joy.

"I could see Polytrack was going to be taking over," said Ramsey, explaining that



Ken Ramsey

development was one of the reasons why he sold Roses in May to the Japanese and kept Kitten's Joy to stand as a stallion at his Ramsey Farm near Nicholasville, Ky. "I was of the opinion that the turf-oriented horses like Kitten's Joy and their offspring

would fare much better on the synthetic tracks, and I think it's already been proven to us that we made the right decision based on how Kitten's Joy's weanlings have sold."

The average price for the six Kitten's Joy weanlings sold at the recent Keeneland November breeding stock sale was \$94,667. The group included a filly that brought \$100,000 and colts that sold for \$125,000, \$130,000, and \$150,000. Kitten's Joy stood for \$25,000 (live foal) during his inaugural season at stud, and was increased to \$30,000 in 2007.

Ramsey also owns Catienus, a leading sire on synthetic surfaces this year with 24 winners through Nov. 20. The son of Storm Cat was ranked No. 23 on the list of leading North American sires as of Nov. 20, with progeny earnings this year of \$4,987,172. He recently moved from New York back to Ramsey Farm, where he had begun his stud career.

"One reason why he came back to Kentucky is because he is really good on the Polytrack as a sire," Ramsey said. "The other reason is that he was up so high on the general sire list. His horses just dominated at Turfway Park last winter. We ended up being the leading owners primarily because of his offspring winning on the Polytrack."

Ramsey had a Polytrack surface installed under one of the two equine exercise machines he has at his farm.

"We use the machines to 'muscle up' our yearlings, and we also use them with the horses we have recuperating on the farm," Ramsey said.

However, other breeders are approach-

ing the synthetic surface issue more cautiously.

Kentucky horseman John Stuart of Bluegrass Thoroughbred Services and The Stallion Company plans the matings for approximately 200 mares each year.

"I haven't really changed anything, but I'm conscious of synthetic surfaces," Stuart said. "While I know they're going to be important, there's not enough information there statistically yet. I do know that the turf stallions are booking like crazy, where you couldn't sell them two years ago. I'll probably be using turf horses more."

Craig Bendoroff of Denali Stud in Kentucky expressed a similar opinion.

"I just don't think there's enough data yet," he said.

"Maybe it's something I should be thinking about more, but there are just other factors that I focus in on, like a physical horse that matches a mare's conformation, stud fee price, and commercial appeal."

Brent Fernung, who operates Journeyman Stud in Florida, also is taking a wait-and-see approach.

"I want to see how it sorts itself out," he said. "There is some suggestion that grass horses are going to perform a little better on synthetic surfaces than on dirt, but that doesn't mean you start grabbing stallions that were bred for grass. If you do consider turf horses as stallions, I would think you would have to look at milers rather than the ones you typically think of as grass horses, the mile-and-a-half turf horses. There are going to be some changes, but I don't think they are going to be as dramatic as some people think, and they're not going to happen rapidly. In the end, I think the good horses are going to do well



Craig Bendoroff

whether they are on dirt, or turf, or Polytrack."

Will Farish is yet another breeder who hasn't altered his approach to breeding horses because of synthetic surfaces.

"Frankly, I think it's too early, from my standpoint, to make any changes



Will Farish

in my breeding recommendations, and I don't think I will in the long term," said Farish, whose Lane's End Farm has stallion operations in Kentucky and Texas. "Basically, you're trying to breed a stallion to the mare that fits him the best to produce a

racehorse that is conceivably adaptable to both turf and dirt even though, obviously, some will like one more than the other. If you go back in history, so many of our foundation sires were grass horses to begin with when they came over from England, or Ireland, or France. Some of them have gone on to do better on dirt (with their progeny) and some have been better on grass."

Synthetic surfaces "aren't going to affect our breeding decisions much," said Seth Hancock, president of Claiborne Farm in Kentucky. "There are a lot of folks who think turf horses are going to have a better opportunity and make better sires because of the synthetics, but I wouldn't be in that camp right now. A lot of the turf horses don't have a lot of speed, and I think maybe that's the reason they don't make good sires."

Doug Cauthen, the president and chief executive officer of Bill Casner and Kenny Troutt's WinStar Farm in Kentucky, also isn't making synthetic surfaces a priority in his breeding plans.



Seth Hancock

"I just think you breed the best mare available to the stallion that's going to get a racehorse," he said. "We're trying to breed the next Kentucky Derby (gr. I) winner. We hope most of our horses will run on both the dirt and the Polytrack."

Lincoln Collins, a bloodstock agent who is a director of Robert and Blythe Clay's Three Chimneys Farm in Kentucky, believes synthetic surfaces should be taken into account

when breeding horses, and he offered the following advice: "You've got to be more broad-minded. It's hard to get the facts, but intuitively, I think you need to look at getting a nice bit of grass in the pedigree, and possibly a little more stamina. A lot of the bang-up sorts that were the jump out (of the starting gate) and run-type of horses that we used to like don't seem to handle the Polytrack so well. They (synthetic surfaces) make a mare with a bit of a grassy pedigree more attractive, but I still think you need to see a horse in the pedigree that's been good in North America, preferably on the dirt." □



Doug Cauthen

Where the Boys Are

BY DAVID SCHMITZ

As sires of synthetic surface runners begin to emerge, locale is proving to be a factor

Synthetic surfaces continue to grow in number, and thus talk has also grown of what makes a good synthetic sire and why some boast big numbers. The jury is still out, but one thing seems certain: In the same way location plays a key role in real estate, it also plays an important part on the current list of leading synthetic sires.

Judging from results so far this year, stallions with a high percentage of runners

based at tracks with synthetic surfaces be the ones putting up the big numbers.

One stallion that seems to have benefited immensely from that arrangement is Bold Executive, who stands at Gardiner Farms near Caledon East, Ontario, Canada. A 23-year-old son of Bold Ruckus, Bold Executive has taken a clear lead on the list of leading synthetic sires. His North American synthetic progeny earnings and number of winners are well above those of

his closest rivals and largely reflect the fact that most of his runners competed over Woodbine's Polytrack. Woodbine, one of nine North American tracks with a synthetic surface, has a lengthy meeting, from March 31 to Dec. 9.

"We got more Polytrack races than anyone around, and that skews things dramatically because of the number of races available to Ontario-bred runners," said Gardiner president Mike Colterjohn. "But for him to be in the lead shows how durable he is."

Colterjohn also feels Bold Executive's runners do more than just show up at the track regularly.

"He's like his daddy in the sense that he gets a horse that doesn't care what he runs on," Colterjohn said. "They can run on hard turf, deep turf, and dirt. They threw this Polytrack at him, and it hasn't made a difference."

"Another thing is that generally they're very hard-legged horses, so they're durable and sound. That's what has made Bold Executive."

Colterjohn has taken steps to ensure that Gardiner stays focused on recruiting stallions whose runners show a liking for synthetic surfaces.

"We moved Peaks and Valleys up here because his runners were running over Polytrack at Turfway and having a lot of fun," he said. "He was one of the leading sires at Turfway. He's like Bold Executive in that he's a hugely durable horse whose run-

Leading Synthetic Earners of 2007 Among Top 75 Sires

Runner	Earnings	Chief Performance
1 Mike Fox	\$618,495	Queen's Plate S. (gr. I)
2 Student Council	\$603,350	Pacific Classic S. (gr. I)
3 Hard Spun	\$580,000	Lane's End S. (gr. II)
4 Dominican	\$537,890	Toyota Blue Grass S. (gr. I)
5 Triago	\$520,950	Goodwood S. (gr. I)
6 Sealy Hill	\$516,735	Labatt Woodbine Oaks
7 Nashoba's Key	\$471,660	Vanity Invitational H. (gr. I)
8 Lava Man	\$470,000	Hollywood Gold Cup S. (gr. I)
9 Wicked Style	\$445,000	Lane's End Breeders' Futurity (gr. I)
10 Awesome Gem	\$406,400	2nd Pacific Classic S. (gr. I)
11 Panty Raid	\$373,675	Juddmonte Spinster S. (gr. I)
12 Lewis Michael	\$327,900	Washington Park H. (gr. II)
13 Bilo	\$327,780	Triple Bend Invitational H. (gr. I)
14 Dance to My Tune	\$310,364	La Lorgnette S.
15 Christmas Kid	\$310,000	Ashland S. (gr. I)



MICHAEL BURNS
BENNETT & ASSOCIATES

ners can run on any type of dirt and turf."

Central Kentucky horseman Bill Farish feels more time is needed to identify what type of runner successfully makes the switch from dirt and/or turf to synthetic surfaces.

"The first conclusion everyone jumped to was that turf horses like synthetic surfaces better," said Farish, whose father, William S. Farish, owns Lane's End Farm near Versailles, Ky. "I don't think that's the whole story. I think dirt horses like it, too. It's like any surface. Some horses like it and some don't. I think it's quirky and blurs the line between dirt and turf."

Lane's End is home to Smart Strike and A.P. Indy, who rank first and second, respectively, on North America's general

sires list by progeny earnings. Both have a low percentage of synthetic winners from overall winners, but both are represented by the earners of more than \$1 million on synthetic surfaces this year.

"Smart Strike is an example of a stallion that gets both dirt and turf runners," Farish said. "Those types of stallions I think will do well. A.P. Indy, whose best horses are on dirt, also has significant turf performers."

"It's interesting to see the (synthetic) sires list now. But as they run more and more on that surface, the lists will prove more meaningful."

Canada's list of leading synthetic sires runs deep. Whiskey Wisdom and Ascot Knight, both of whom stand at the Taylor

CHRB: A Progressive Step

Richard Shapiro, chairman of the California Horse Racing Board, said he's "ecstatic" with the results of the commission's synthetic track mandate passed last year—as well as by the level acceptance of the change from horsemen and track representatives.

"Just look at the results," said Shapiro. "Field sizes are up. Wagering, especially from out of state, has increased dramatically. We have hundreds more horses coming into the state from elsewhere. The barns are full; Santa Anita had a great meet (during Oak Tree); and Golden Gate Fields is doing terrific."

"No surface is going to be 100% perfect for animals as powerful as Thoroughbreds running on ankles little bigger than your wrist. But injuries are way down at each of the tracks with synthetic tracks. So overall, I'm ecstatic. I couldn't be more pleased with the results."

The CHRB became the first racing jurisdiction to deliver such an edict for its major tracks, in May 2006. The board required associations that race continuously for more than four weeks to have a synthetic surface installed by Jan. 1, 2008. Four of the tracks—Hollywood Park (Cushion Track), Del Mar (Polytrack), Santa Anita Park (Cushion Track), and Golden Gate Fields (Tapeta Footings)—have invested \$9 million to \$10 million apiece for the upgrade. Only Bay Meadows, which could be shuttered by development plans next year, sought a waiver. After much political wrangling, the Bay Area landmark was granted a one-year exemption from the mandate and will operate in 2008.



Richard Shapiro

Shapiro said he knew the synthetic track mandate was "a progressive step." But he also felt the tracks in question were due to replace their sub-surface bases and irrigation systems, which he estimated would account for about \$4 million of the cost.

"So, if it didn't work out, the worst that could happen is they remove the synthetic material and replace it," he said. "It wouldn't be a total loss, and they'd still have the improvements."

Shapiro said the comments he has received on the new surfaces have been strongly positive, but not 100%.

"You're never going to get everyone involved in this industry to completely agree. There's going to be 5 to 10% who aren't going to like it. Another 5 to 10% will say the jury is still out. One person at the track will tell me what a great decision it was (by the board). And then, not five minutes later, an owner will tell me he's pulling his horses out of the state because of it."

The most criticism he's heard so far has been directed at Del Mar's slower Polytrack. Fans and many horsemen disliked the slow times and strung-out finishes. Horses in sprint races ran about two seconds slower than on the old dirt track. Routes were off by about three seconds. There were also reports of problems with kickback.

"However, they came back safe, and that's the most important thing," Shapiro said. "Overall (the issues with the surfaces) will get worked out."

By Jack Shinar

2007 Leading Synthetic Sires

Includes stallions with at least one runner at a North American racetrack with a synthetic surface. Leaders are by North American progeny earnings on a synthetic surface through November 28, 2007. The heading "AW" refers to all-weather (synthetic) surfaces. **Catagorical leaders are in bold.**

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB, Sire)	Runners All/AW	Winners All/AW	Stks/Wnrs All/AW	(Chief Earners, Earnings)	AW Earnings	% of Erngs	Cumulative			
								Foals	AW Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	BOLD EXECUTIVE , (1984, Bold Ruckus)	130/100	75/46	4/4	(Fudgethebottomline, \$179,769)	\$3,167,182	79%	562	5	1.73	1.36
2	TIZNOW , (1997, Cee's Tizzy)	143/58	74/19	6/4	(Bear Now, \$291,517)	\$1,502,274	33%	283	4	1.62	2.29
3	A.P. INDY , (1989, Seattle Slew)	156/60	72/17	18/3	(A. P. Xcellent, \$243,000)	\$1,469,426	16%	839	5	3.23	3.84
4	STORMY ATLANTIC , (1994, Storm Cat)	237/63	121/17	12/2	(Saskawea, \$300,218)	\$1,391,413	23%	554	4	1.60	1.53
5	KIRIDASHI , (1992, Bold Ruckus)	53/31	29/11	3/2	(Financingavailable, \$296,830)	\$1,372,431	65%	191	2	1.49	1.55
6	BERTRANDO , (1989, Skywalker)	155/80	81/22	8/3	(Bilo, \$327,780)	\$1,316,093	33%	739	3	1.52	1.71
7	EL CORREDOR , (1997, Mr. Greeley)	151/60	74/18	4/2	(Dominican, \$537,890)	\$1,312,716	34%	270	2	1.63	1.78
8	MUTAKDDIM , (1991, Seeking the Gold)	198/81	122/31	5/1	(Nyuk Nyuk Nyuk, \$86,164)	\$1,305,314	27%	830	1	1.84	1.51
9	GIANT'S CAUSEWAY , (1997, Storm Cat)	141/57	69/15	13/2	(Mike Fox, \$618,495)	\$1,296,029	19%	665	2	2.05	3.53
10	BOLD N' FLASHY , (1989, Bold Ruckus)	97/65	55/20	2/0	(Red Raffles, \$141,191)	\$1,276,304	60%	242	0	1.42	1.31
11	TALE OF THE CAT , (1994, Storm Cat)	221/83	113/23	11/2	(Ashley's Kitty, \$124,308)	\$1,220,192	22%	895	3	1.74	1.90
12	STREET CRY (IRE) , (1998, Machiavellian)	64/34	29/10	9/3	(Street Sounds, \$253,801)	\$1,154,106	20%	242	3	3.42	2.29
13	FOREST WILDCAT , (1991, Storm Cat)	154/54	77/14	14/2	(Wild Gams, \$296,315)	\$1,120,094	27%	568	2	1.56	1.91
14	WHISKEY WISDOM , (1993, Wild Again)	70/40	37/15	2/1	(Dave the Knave, \$95,108)	\$1,108,597	73%	240	2	1.65	1.73
15	IN EXCESS (IRE) , (1987, Siberian Express)	137/58	73/16	5/2	(Spring Awakening, \$167,962)	\$1,093,570	33%	713	2	1.95	1.54
16	DISTORTED HUMOR , (1993, Forty Niner)	208/75	96/17	18/0	(Hystericalady, \$123,220)	\$1,085,334	13%	591	1	2.54	1.87
17	ASCOT KNIGHT , (1984, Danzig)	66/49	32/19	0/0	(Knightly Attire, \$147,913)	\$1,082,153	71%	641	0	1.44	1.63
18	SMART STRIKE , (1992, Mr. Prospector)	192/68	89/19	15/1	(Strike Impact, \$110,224)	\$1,080,801	8%	535	3	2.89	1.97
19	PLEASANT TAP , (1987, Pleasant Colony)	104/30	53/12	7/2	(Tiago, \$520,950)	\$1,079,388	28%	532	3	1.96	1.67
20	AWESOME AGAIN , (1994, Deputy Minister)	146/53	75/14	11/1	(Awesome Gem, \$406,400)	\$1,071,910	15%	423	1	2.68	2.28
21	ONE WAY LOVE , (1995, Regal Classic)	72/61	28/17	1/1	(You Will Love Me, \$206,592)	\$1,058,976	77%	142	2	1.06	1.41
22	TRAJECTORY , (1997, Gone West)	70/53	23/15	1/1	(Dancer's Bajan, \$254,502)	\$1,053,591	79%	143	2	1.35	1.39
23	MARIA'S MON , (1993, Wavering Monarch)	177/56	94/20	9/1	(Sky Mom, \$122,923)	\$1,048,458	20%	594	1	1.65	1.60
24	SLEW CITY SLEW , (1984, Seattle Slew)	142/44	80/15	4/1	(Lava Man, \$470,000)	\$1,027,212	26%	668	1	1.55	1.39
25	TETHRA , (1992, Cure the Blues)	80/53	40/14	2/1	(Don's Folly, \$133,283)	\$1,008,194	61%	258	1	1.41	1.44
26	UNUSUAL HEAT , (1990, Nureyev)	110/66	56/14	5/3	(Runforthemoneybaby, \$160,144)	\$975,012	28%	300	3	2.04	1.10
27	BENCHMARK , (1991, Alydar)	126/50	62/17	5/2	(Idiot Proof, \$231,084)	\$974,244	35%	361	2	1.58	1.25
28	LANGFUHR , (1992, Danzig)	218/75	127/21	15/1	(Fuhrever Dancing, \$103,397)	\$969,547	12%	954	1	1.67	1.54
29	COMPADRE , (1990, El Gran Senor)	61/46	25/14	1/1	(Simple Sister, \$124,212)	\$960,188	76%	215	1	1.10	1.02
30	POINT GIVEN , (1998, Thunder Gulch)	93/42	34/9	3/2	(Sealy Hill, \$516,735)	\$903,656	28%	202	2	1.98	2.19
31	STEPHEN GOT EVEN , (1996, A.P. Indy)	142/52	73/13	9/4	(Steve's Double, \$129,000)	\$879,457	28%	275	4	1.49	1.48
32	SWISS YODELER , (1994, Eastern Echo)	192/79	95/18	3/1	(Switzerland, \$57,640)	\$869,573	27%	415	1	1.31	1.07
33	CATIENUS , (1994, Storm Cat)	157/59	100/24	8/1	(Southern Kitten, \$110,965)	\$834,289	16%	253	2	1.60	1.48
34	CARSON CITY , (1987, Mr. Prospector)	168/47	96/11	6/3	(Kesagami, \$199,428)	\$828,736	20%	1020	3	1.94	1.92

family's Windfields Farms near Oshawa, Ontario, have more than held their own.

"When Polytrack came in, Bold Executive and Whiskey Wisdom got off to a good start last year," said Windfields director of sales and marketing Bernard McCormack. "Ascot Knight has always had versatile runners on dirt and turf, and he has kept up on Polytrack.

"They're different types of horses. Whiskey Wisdom is more of a long-back, leggy-type horse, and has a fair amount of turf in his pedigree. Ascot Knight ran on turf, and was pretty versatile on different goings. His offspring seem to be the same, so they were pretty adaptable to racing on Polytrack."

McCormack feels there is a big difference in the type of preparation for synthetic horses rather than dirt and/or turf runners.

"Horses have to work two seconds faster over the ground to



Bold Executive, North America's leading synthetic surface sire

get the same amount of exercise that they were getting on the old surfaces," he said. "There is an adjustment in getting horses fit in terms that they have to do more because they are just bouncing on it so much easier."

California-based stallions also have a built-in advantage in that the state boasts four tracks with synthetic surfaces: Del Mar, Golden Gate Fields, Hollywood Park, and Santa Anita.

Russell Drake, who manages Martin and Pam Wygod's River Edge Farm, wasn't too surprised to see farm stallions Bertrando and Benchmark on the leading synthetic sires list, but not because of the home-field advantage.

"Bertrando has been a good sire all along, and he's done it just about anywhere," Drake said from the Buellett, Calif., farm. "They're just nice stallions, and it's a plus in their favor."

Perhaps that's all a stallion needs to succeed. 📌

Tracking Trainers

COMPILED BY STEVE HASKIN

Conditioners differ widely on their experiences

Trainers face the biggest adjustment in how to prepare their charges for racing over synthetic surfaces. Here is a cross-section of their comments, with their home bases in parentheses.

READE BAKER (WOODBINE)

“We’re not getting what we were promised. When the guy spoke here at Woodbine, he talked about how there was no maintenance; how the track stays the same all the time; and very few injuries. Those things don’t happen to be true. Some injuries are less, but some injuries are a lot more. I’m not saying it’s worse than dirt; I’m just saying it’s not what we dreamed of.



Reade Baker

“I haven’t trained on it in two months; I train all mine on the dirt training track, unless it’s real sloppy. I’ve had horses with stress fractures of the pelvis and femur, which is rare on dirt tracks. But I don’t think Woodbine’s surface is any worse than the other artificial surfaces. They’re trying to work on it all time, but nobody expected this after all the speeches.”

JOSIE CARROLL (WOODBINE)

“It’s definitely been a learning curve up here. It’s kind of changed as the year went on. I think they’ve gotten more of a handle on the track. But we’re still looking for a little more consistency.



Josie Carroll

“The biggest advantage would be that there are no training days lost, but I don’t know at this point that it’s lived up to what we expected. Clearly, the catastrophic

injuries are down, but I don’t think that it’s had a significant impact on reducing everyday injuries. I guess the bottom line is, athletes are going to get injured, no matter what they run on. If we can cut the catastrophic injuries down, that’s great, but I don’t think we’re ever going to eliminate the everyday injuries.

“You don’t want to really knock the surface, because we were having a lot of injuries on the old surface, but no question, we are having problems with it. Last year, we were having a lot of separation in the track. We were finding that the fiber was separating from the sand part. They’ve added some components to it, so we’re not getting so much of that this year, which is one positive aspect.

“It’s difficult evaluating my horses on it. I like to think I can get a pretty good handle on my horses, but sometimes you go over there and you really don’t know what to expect. I’ll have a horse I expect great things from and I won’t get it. Then I’ll take a horse over there that hasn’t been impressing me and it jumps up and runs an enormous race on this surface.”

BOB TILLER (WOODBINE)

“It’s here and we’re stuck with it. We have to live with it, but we’re learning more and more about it as time goes by. I think management is learning how to handle it and treat it properly.

“At first we thought we were getting a racetrack where horses wouldn’t get hurt and it was going to be the next coming of Christ. And it isn’t. But it’s OK; we just have to get used to it. It’s eliminated mud breeding and plodders, which I always thought was a good thing for the game and for the handicappers.

“I do have to say I think it’s gotten better in the last three months. I haven’t had as many injuries on it this year as I did last year, so I think it’s going in the right direction. Up here, especially with our weather, it’s taken a lot more management than they predicted in regard to keeping it fair, with no bias. Let’s just say I’m not completely in love with it, but I certainly don’t hate it.”

MARK FROSTAD (WOODBINE)

“It’s a work in progress. It’s improved a lot since the early days. Last year, a lot of the fiber came out and the track started separating in the cold. In the first couple of months it was pretty hard on the horses. After they made some adjustments to it, it’s gotten a lot better. Each individual track has to learn to keep it at a reasonable consistency where it’s not too hard and not too loose.



Mark Frostad

“I really don’t see a big difference in the number of injuries. It cut down on certain injuries, but there are other kinds of injuries. We never really had a lot of catastrophic injuries with the old track. I find less chips, but more

soft-tissue injuries; more back-end stuff. The key is, they’re getting much better at maintaining the track and I’m happy enough with it now.”

DALE ROMANS (KENTUCKY AND ARLINGTON)

“I’m not a fan of it, and I don’t think it’s a cure to our problems. I like using it as an option to train on, but I wouldn’t want to be forced to run on it and train on it exclusively. We see plenty of injuries on it, just different kinds, and I don’t think any one track suits all horses. I’ve been fortunate to be able to train at Keeneland and Turfway with horses I think like it and Churchill with horses I want to keep off of it.



Dale Romans

“I do think they jumped the gun to mandate it in California. It seems that people have short memories. This isn’t the first revolutionary track we’ve had in America. We had the Tartan track at Calder and the Equi-track at Remington, and I don’t think they really gave this enough time to sort out the issues with it.”

DARRIN MILLER (KENTUCKY)

“First and foremost, it’s safe. We have a lot to learn as the years go by, but it’s very convenient and consistent, and whenever you have a stable of horses, consistency is very important. So, I think we’re in good shape there. Overall, we’ve had a positive experience with it. Horses do seem to recover quicker off of a race and it doesn’t seem to scathe them at all.

PHOTOS BY ELIOT J. SCHECHTER, MICHAEL DUINS, ANNE M. EBERHARDT, RICK SAMUELS

"It prolongs a horse's career and allows you to get more mileage out of them. On the negative side, I question the concussion. That sounds odd, because it's supposed to be the opposite, but I had a couple of young horses that trained on it that had some bone bruising. Maybe it was just coincidence, but that would be my only negative."

EDDIE KENNEALLY (KENTUCKY)

"I like it. We've spent a lot of time on the Polytrack since it first came around at Turfway and Keeneland. So far, it's everything I've expected it to be. It's important to keep in mind that these are athletes, and you're going to get a certain amount of injuries. Some people expect Polytrack to be a miracle-worker, that there aren't going to be any problems, but that's not the case. I think horses who have existing problems, they're not going to go away if you move them from dirt to Polytrack.

"There are less bone problems, especially bucked shins in the young horses. But there are still some soft-tissue injuries we are experiencing. There's no doubt it's cut down on the catastrophic injuries. It's definitely been a help in making the horses last longer; and they bounce out of the races quicker. And of course, it lets you train more days in the winter; you don't have to alter your training schedule."

JOHN SHIRREFFS (CALIFORNIA)

"I think it's fine to train on, but I don't think it's a good surface to race on. For horses to run well, whether it's on dirt or turf, they need to have a bottom, something to push off of. Synthetic surfaces, like Del Mar's Polytrack, and Keeneland as well, don't have a firm bottom for the horses to get a hold of, so they really struggle on it.

"The synthetic surfaces don't have any bounce; they don't help the horse; they cause it to labor. As soon as it warmed up at Del Mar and the wax got a little soft, it was more like running in sand. Santa Anita has very little cushion on top and is very firm on the bottom, and it's more like dirt racing. The only bad thing is, how do you separate good horses from bad



John Shirreffs

horses when everyone is running six furlongs in 1:07 and change and 1:08? I don't know how fast horses can run. When they go 1:07 and change, is that a good horse? It's like Arlington Park. When you have tracks that have a firm bottom, they start to mimic dirt, so if you're going to have a

dirt track in disguise, why not just give a horse a track that it likes, which is dirt? Why not spend the money to build a good, safe dirt track?

"As for the injury factor, you have the soft-tissue injuries and hind-end problems on synthetic surfaces. A lot of young horses don't like it, because it has the give, but it doesn't have the bounce-back factor, which helps get them to the next stride. So, when they start getting up to five furlongs in their works, they suffer from it. It's mostly the young horses and the good horses who get hurt on it, because they're the ones who are still willing to give you 110%. The first year with a synthetic surface at Hollywood Park they had more catastrophic injuries than they had the last year on the dirt track. They had really gotten the dirt track in good shape."

DOUG O'NEILL (CALIFORNIA)

"I love them. I think they're great, and I'm a big proponent of them. With each additional meet, they're learning something from the previous one. It probably will be a while before it's perfect, but it's better than what we



Doug O'Neill

had before. In the morning, Del Mar was a lot like Hollywood and Santa Anita. In Del Mar's defense, I think it was so fresh and so new, they just didn't want to tinker with it. The Polytrack people were saying to leave it alone.

They've already announced they'll do different track management with it next year to try to maintain consistency between the morning and the afternoon. Knock on wood, there has been a huge decline in major injuries, and you can see in the entry box that the field sizes are up. Horses are definitely staying sounder longer."

NICK ZITO (KENTUCKY AND NEW YORK)

"I don't think there's enough data in, and in my opinion they jumped the gun. There were a lot of injuries and the environment has changed, so they jumped right into the artificial surfaces, and I think they made a mistake. They were panicking because of all the injuries and all the situations that have occurred in our business. However, they didn't take into consideration that they don't make horses like they used to. If you look at synthetic surfaces now, they may not have as many bone issues and catastrophic injuries, but they have an awful lot of soft-tissue injuries and an awful lot of hind-end issues. I commend them for trying to help the

horse, obviously, but I think they acted a little too harshly.

"Number one, it's going to change the breed. Whether you take Arthur Hancock's Maribel, who won the East View after they took it off the turf, or Mrs. (Charlotte) Weber's filly My Typhoon, who won the Jenny Wiley, which was also taken off the turf, you can see there's not much difference between turf and synthetic surfaces. What they need to do is stop right now and get more data. Now, my plan is this: I believe that every dirt track from here on in has to be monitored by someone from the state who has close ties to racing and breeding. They need to come in and make sure that the money is spent maintaining dirt tracks properly.

Dirt is a beautiful surface. As Arthur Hancock says, 'Remember, God created dirt and grass.' The great baseball player, Richie Allen, once said about artificial turf in baseball, "If a horse won't eat it, I don't want to play on it."

WAYNE CATALANO (ARLINGTON)

"It's been super. The track is real good and it's held the moisture real good. It drained beautifully all meet and held up to the weather very well. It's probably a bit faster than the other Polytrack surfaces, and speed is doing good on it. I was really happy with it. I haven't seen any statistics regarding the number of injuries, so I don't know of any differences."



Wayne Catalano

BOB HOLTHUS (KENTUCKY)

"Of course, I've never been fortunate enough to train over it, being stabled at Churchill Downs and Oaklawn. I've run on it, and I think we're at a disadvantage not having trained on it. I don't think it's a cure-all. You're still having injuries, but there are definitely parts of the country where artificial surfaces are better than what they had, such as Turfway Park, which races in the wintertime. I guess I'm too old-fashioned to be completely sold on it. Keeneland had injuries this fall; Arlington had injuries."

BERNIE FLINT (KENTUCKY)

"I can understand all-weather tracks. In the winter, we used to not race very much because of the dangers of cold weather. They used to go to Havana, Florida, California, Fair Grounds. Now they're running at Woodbine when it's five-below-zero. What are we doing? I've won more titles at Turfway Park in the winter than anyone; let's get that straight. But we're running

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

at places where we shouldn't run in winter. I think Turfway and Woodbine did the right thing by putting them in. They have to put down something to run there in winter. But California? What are they doing? They stack their hay outside there. They don't know what rain is.

"I'm not ridiculing anyone for trying to change, but you should know if it works first. Are you making the American speed horse a thing of the past? Let me know when you see a Quarter Horse race run over a synthetic surface.

"Give me a dirt track where you had great horses fighting each other, not fighting the racetrack. They're born to run; that's what they do. Some are gonna get hurt whether they run on synthetic or dirt tracks.

"I'll probably lose my 15 stalls at Turfway for this. I'll end up in Florida and they'll put the stuff in down there, too."

CARL NAFZGER (KENTUCKY)

"We've got a lot to learn about it. They've got a lot to learn how to manage it, and jockeys got a lot to learn how to ride over it. It'll work itself out, but it's going to take time. I think it can be a common denominator to have at all tracks. If you look at the Breeders' Cup this year, if it had been run on a synthetic surface, the horses would have been bunched up better and not strung

out to the quarter pole. Even if your horse doesn't handle it real good, he still runs over it. With mud, if they don't run on it, well, just look how far they were from first to last in the Breeders' Cup. Street Sense didn't like the mud at all at Monmouth; he was climbing the whole race. He was good enough to put us in position, but he wasn't good enough to bear down and go with Curlin. All you have to do is look at all the good horses who were up the track in the Breeders' Cup and there's your argument for synthetics.

"As far as injuries, when you have races, you're gonna have horses get hurt, no matter what surface it is. That's life. If you ride bulls, you're gonna get hurt, whether you ride baby bulls or big bulls."

RICK VIOLETTE (NEW YORK)

"Like a lot of people, I'm still trying to figure them out, to at least see what horses would do better on them. It's been trial and error, so it's still a work in progress. Horses can train well over it and not handle it in the afternoon, so that's discouraging to lead a horse over



Rick Violette

there who has been training well and they spin their wheels. I think the intentions were very good, looking at the safety of the horse. Everybody wants a perfect world and that just doesn't happen."

TOM PROCTOR (ARLINGTON AND KENTUCKY)

"I enjoy training on it, because you never train on a bad racetrack. I think they're totally different wherever you lay them down. I think it has some good points with injuries and stuff. Handicapping-wise it becomes a bit of a chore. If people don't bet, this game is going to close down in a day, so we can't just toss the bettors aside. At Keeneland, it's close to 100% that grass horses like the Polytrack. But it's not so much at Arlington. I've raced at Arlington, Keeneland, and Woodbine, and I do think it's a little safer.



Tom Proctor

"There are some things that have to be worked out. Maybe we're heading in the right direction. And maybe we don't need them as much as everybody thinks. A good racetrack is a good racetrack."

PHOTOS BY SHIP DICKESTEIN AND GARRY JONES

JOCKEYS

Ride On

COMPILED BY LESLIE DECKARD

Jockeys get smoother trip on synthetics

Besides the horses, one group most affected by the change from traditional dirt surfaces to synthetic surfaces are the jockeys. They not only race-ride the horses, but exercise them during the morning hours. Riders, while not in total agreement that synthetic is the way to go for each and every racetrack, do agree the new surfaces are safer.

ROBBY ALBARADO

"It has to be a lot better for horses' bodies because it is better for my body. The horses pounding on the dirt surface is very hard on my body, and the way they run on the synthetic surface doesn't jar my body

as much. It feels like you are running on a mattress, actually.

"I think it is different for every racetrack. If you ask me if I would rather ride the old



Robby Albarado

Keeneland track or the new one, I would say the new one. Then, you have Churchill Downs, which has a great racetrack. It handles water well and is pretty fair. I don't think they would benefit from having a synthetic surface.

I don't think it is a solution to every racetrack, but for the ones that have it, they needed it.

"We have talked about potential health problems, but haven't seen any yet. When the weather gets hot, you get a strong rubber smell. Maybe we're breathing more of it in.

"If I can go around there every day with one pair of goggles and one pair of pants and not have sand hit me at 35-miles-per-hour, yeah, I will take that every day."

GARRETT GOMEZ

"Each Polytrack and Cushion Track surface is completely different. At Keeneland, it is a little fluffier than most of them (Polytracks). They don't run real fast over it. They (Hollywood and Santa Anita) have the same surface, Cushion Track, but they are very different surfaces. One is dark and one looks a lot like Polytrack. They don't feel anything alike.

"The Polytrack doesn't have a lot of kickback, which is good for the horses. It gives horses that have never run a chance, and horses that don't break well a little bit of a chance. I just think it is fair all over.

"I have just learned by being around

RICK SAMUELS

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

them (synthetic racing surfaces) more in the last couple of years that I like them more than I like dirt. I was one of those guys who had a lot of disbelief about the synthetic tracks and whether they would really help racing. But after racing on it and seeing the injuries cut down, I think it is a bonus not only for the soundness of horses, but other aspects in racing also.”



Garrett Gomez

JOHN VELAZQUEZ

“You have to adjust to the way the track is playing and what would be the best scenario for that particular race and that horse in that race.



John Velazquez

“I would think it is a little closer to running on the grass than on the dirt. Your mentality (in riding the race) is that of trying to ride a grass race instead of riding a dirt race.

“Does my body feel better because it is softer? Yes, but

on the other hand you get tired because the horses are going really slow. Sometimes you have to ride a little bit harder to carry the horses through it.”

PATRICK HUSBANDS

“The Polytrack to me is the best thing that has ever happened to racing. It is easy on the horses and is a more patient racetrack. It is a big change in riding. The sand, you can play it by ear, but with the Polytrack, you always have to wait, wait, wait. The longer you can go by leaving the horse alone and not harassing them, the more horse you get down the lane. I am winning more races on the Polytrack than I did on the dirt.”



Patrick Husbands

WILLIE MARTINEZ

“There are different concepts to it and you just have to adjust, just like you would with anything else. It is like when you buy a brand new car and you get rid of your old one. It takes you time to figure out how to drive it.

“For the safety of the horses and the riders it is a great thing. If it is going to be harder on anyone, it has to be the handicappers, trying to figure out the track.

“What I like the best, being able to ride Brass Hat in the level of big races he has been running in and performing the way he did before we went to the (Emirates Airline Dubai) World Cup (UAE-I). He was training on a daily basis on a synthetic racetrack and we got a lot of good results. I loved the way it had an impact on Brass Hat’s career. It helped him because he was a horse that was injured before and it was more kind on him. It does help horses like him to move forward in their training. That was a great positive sign that I liked about that racetrack.”

RENE DOUGLAS

“Synthetic surfaces for me are the best for racing. You have more horses running. When it rains they do not have to scratch. What’s best for racing is something that keeps the horses racing.

“They are different from each other. For example, the rail at Keeneland is dead slow now. Everybody tries to get outside to the same spot, and that leads to safety issues. Plus, the fans look at that and wonder what we’re trying to do. It’s a problem that needs to get fixed.

“What I like about it is that you don’t have to get that dirt in your face. It is easier for a horse to ride through, and easier to control your horse. We (the jockeys) think better when we can see and when we are not getting hit.

“I would 100% prefer synthetic surfaces.”

PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBENHARDT AND BARBARA D. LIVINGSTON

Farriers: Keep It Level

COLBY TIPTON (KENTUCKY)

“When Keeneland first resurfaced, a lot of people said they wanted Queens Plates, which are flush with no toe grabs, up front and behind. Typically, you would use an XT (extra toe), which is an eighth-of-an-inch-tall toe grab up front, and a quarter-inch behind. Now, people have gone back to the XTs. There was a phase people went through where they wanted to try something new, but they saw less traction than they needed, so they switched back.

“Very few people use anything abstract like caulks or stickers.

“Personally, I don’t see any advantage to leaving more heel and less toe. It’s not a traction device; it’s a movement device to try and increase the breakover. The tracks do seem to be more sticky, and I’d rather not put that much pressure on the foot. I’d rather have it as flat as possible,



ANNE M. EBENHARDT

especially up front. If you leave too much heel on a Thoroughbred—the foot of the Thoroughbred is a lot weaker than most other breeds—anything in excess, like too much heel or too much toe, is going to lead to jarring the sesamoid and coffin bone by messing with their natural angle. I’m a balance-type person. I like the horse to be as natural as possible to keep everything mechanically sound. I don’t see a whole lot of advantage to leaving a lot of heel.

“Horses are creatures of habit, so I don’t like switching shoes on them. They can adjust to the dirt or synthetic surface. I shod Smarty Jones when he won the Derby and Preakness (both gr. I). The Derby was on a sloppy track, and we didn’t mess with what we normally did.

“The Polytrack tends to wear the shoes out a lot quicker than dirt. It’s much more abrasive.”

ROBERT TREASURE (CALIFORNIA)

“My clients, before the synthetic surfaces, had moved into a Queens Plate in front and regular toe (a quarter-inch) behind. Since the synthetics, half of them have stayed with that, and half have gone to a Queens Plate all around. We don’t use the turn-downs here anymore.

“I wouldn’t mess with the heel and toe. A horse is still a horse with the same conformation it had before he got on the synthetic surface. You want to shoe them to their conformation. A horse with a steep angle to his shoulder and pastern needs to be steep in the foot; one with a sloping shoulder and pastern, you have to shoe him that way.

“I haven’t had any problems since moving to the synthetic surfaces. “The horse racing board here has outlawed any toe grab longer than four millimeters on the front foot.”

Work and Thought

BY TOM LaMARRA AND JACK SHINAR

Track superintendents are finding synthetic surfaces aren't 'maintenance free'

When synthetic racing surfaces were introduced in North America a little more than two years ago, a key selling point was that they would drastically reduce maintenance costs and require fewer man hours for track upkeep. All you needed was to find people to keep the surfaces clear of horse manure.

By most accounts, maintenance costs, water use, and man hours are down. But track superintendents have found synthetic surfaces require lots of work and thought. They can be downright quirky, and are impacted by things such as temperature, use, and even sunlight.

The first synthetic surface used for racing in the U.S. was Polytrack, which was installed at Turfway Park and Keeneland in Kentucky. It debuted at Turfway in September 2005; Keeneland followed in October 2006, but already had the material on its training track.

"When it was first put in, we heard it would be maintenance-free and wouldn't freeze," Keeneland track superintendent Mike Young said. "Nothing is maintenance-free, and any track will freeze. We're learning as we go that some things work better than others."

In two years, the racing industry has discovered not all synthetic surfaces—primarily a mixture of silica sand, rubber, carpet fibers, and wax—play the same. They may be consistent from inside rail to outside rail, but surface depth can be adjusted; they can be sped up or slowed down.

Outside of basic equipment such as a Gallop Master, which fluffs up the top few inches of material, and a harrow, racetracks have had to devise their own

maintenance procedures, largely based on input from horsemen. Former trainer Michael Dickinson, creator of Tapeta Footings, swears by his feet.

Dickinson, who oversaw installation of Tapeta surfaces at Golden Gate Fields in California and Presque Isle Downs in Pennsylvania, regularly jogged around the surfaces barefoot to determine if they passed muster.

"A scientist would probably be horrified, but I know what works," Dickinson said.

There is no formula for maintaining racing surfaces, synthetic or traditional, which obviously are subject to change due to moisture and temperature variants. There is, however, a maintenance regimen used by track superintendents for the sake of consistency.

During live race meets at Keeneland, for instance, the crew picks up manure at about 10 a.m., after training hours. The Polytrack is then harrowed about four inches deep, and the Gallop Master is used to treat the top 2½ inches.

The surface may be worked between

races, depending on the location of the starting gate.

At Golden Gate Fields, where Tapeta debuted Nov. 7, the track maintenance team has taken a "less is better" approach, said Calvin Rainey, the track's vice president and assistant general manager. And that's with a full stable area of about 1,350 horses and no training track.

During the morning, track superintendent Juan Meza said, the surface renovation break is no longer used for raking and, if necessary, watering the track. Instead, the 20-minute break is used to remove manure.

"We don't change it (the track) at the break," Meza said. "But we clean it up."

With mild autumn temperatures, Meza said there has been no need to water the Tapeta surface. He and his crew have not noticed much, if any, difference in the track's consistency from morning to afternoon, which was an issue with the Polytrack at Del Mar.

"We will maybe want to water in the summer when the surface gets hot, just to cool it off," Rainey said.

Golden Gate officials estimated the track will save 30 million gallons of water per year by having a synthetic surface.

Ted Malloy became track consultant for Magna Entertainment, which owns both Golden Gate and Santa Anita Park, after retiring as track superintendent at Gulfstream Park in 1999. Santa Anita recently completed the seven-week Oak Tree Racing Association meet, its first operating on the Cushion Track synthetic surface.

Malloy said the Santa Anita maintenance crew would "rip" the surface a couple of times a week using a farm cultivator, pulled by a tractor, that cuts to the base of the outer cushion and brings the bottom layers to the top.

"It's part of a learning process," Malloy



Mike Young



Maintaining synthetic surfaces remains a learning process

JEFF COADY/COADY PHOTOGRAPHY

said of the change from dirt track maintenance. "Ripping helps keep the surface manageable. It's more consistent after you rip it. It improves the safety for horses, and this is about keeping horses sound. The bettors like it because the times don't fluctuate as much."

Malloy acknowledged some felt the Cushion Track was playing too fast at Santa Anita this fall.

"But the horsemen liked it," he said. "We only had to pick up one horse (because of a fatal breakdown) on the Cushion Track in seven weeks of racing."

Malloy said so far, it appears that Santa Anita, with its greater temperature extremes, needs a little more maintenance than is required at Golden Gate. Santa Anita closed its main track Dec. 3 for tests and adjustments because the track was not draining sufficiently.

"I really like the Tapeta surface," Malloy said.

Prior to racing Nov. 10, Golden Gate was hit by about an inch of rain overnight. But it had all drained by the morning, Meza said. After a light harrowing, "it was perfectly dry," the track superintendent said. Rain continued throughout the race day, but the track remained fast.

During racing, the surface is harrowed once by a lightweight tractor rather than in between each heat. Additional raking may be necessary, depending on where the starting gate was placed in the preceding race.

In order to avoid disruption of the surface on the inside of the track, the track crew pulls the starting gate, which is pushed by a tractor, into place.

Turfway, as the first track in the U.S. to race on a synthetic surface, has been a laboratory of sorts. The revelation that temperature does in fact impact Polytrack led to the tweaking of the surface on several occasions. Primarily, the wax was changed to help avoid stickiness and kick-back, and to provide consistency in the summer and winter.

Jeff Chapman, who took over as track superintendent from his brother, Dan, in August, developed a regimen for Polytrack maintenance, and also keeps a detailed log that provides data used to maintain the surface.

Once a day, a Gallop Master is used to fluff the top 2½-3 inches of material. Twice a month, a power harrow is used to mix the top five inches of material. Once a month, a rototiller follows the harrowing machine.

"That brings everything up so it doesn't get hard underneath," Chapman said. "But mostly all you'll see (on a daily basis) is a Gallop Master."



TREVOR JONES

Michael Dickinson with his Tapeta surface at the Al Quoz training center in Dubai

Polytrack data maintained by Turfway includes daily workout times and the temperature during workouts. Chapman also performs a depth analysis every sixteenth of a mile around the track and in the chutes. The surface is probed seven inches deep at six points at each pole once a month to ensure the Polytrack is level from the inside rail to the outside rail.

Chapman said thus far, he has found only two "low spots" that were off by just 1½ inches. The old sand-and-dirt surface had to be graded at least twice a day in the winter, he said.

"This surface has 95% less maintenance," Chapman said. "We went all summer with no complaints and no breakdowns."

As for cost, Turfway president Bob Ellison said officials "probably overestimated the simplicity with which we could maintain Polytrack, but we've still seen a more than 40% reduction in labor, materials, and time associated with maintenance."

Chapman was a member of the "graveyard shift" when Turfway had a conventional dirt surface, which in the winter sometimes required 24-hour maintenance in an attempt to get the track ready for

training and racing each day. It wasn't unusual for the surface to freeze and then thaw into a dirt soup that rendered it uneven.

In Northern California, Meza and Rainey both expressed satisfaction with the conversion from the former dirt surface at Golden Gate.

"This is the greatest thing to happen here in a long time," Meza said.

Young, the longtime Keeneland track superintendent, has similar feelings, but he noted synthetic surfaces aren't what he called a "cure-all," and indicated the learning experience is far from over.

"I don't think it's any different," Young said of maintaining a synthetic surface versus a dirt surface. "You still wake up and worry that everything is going to be OK. And the longer the surface is down, the more experts you have telling you what you should do."

Track maintenance can be a lose-lose situation. The old Keeneland dirt track had a definitive inside bias that carried speed and often drew complaints. The first two meets with Polytrack, outside closers had a distinct advantage, and that drew complaints.

Major North American Players in Synthetic Surfaces

Trademarked Name	POLYTRACK	CUSHION TRACK	TAPETA	SAFETRACK
Company	Martin Collins Surfaces and Footings	Equestrian Surfaces	Tapeta Footings	Andrews Bowen
Sites	Keeneland, Turfway Park, Woodbine, Arlington Park, Del Mar	Hollywood Park, Santa Anita Park	Presque Isle Downs, Golden Gate Fields, Al Quoz training center (Dubai), Fair Hill Training Center	OBS
Owners	Martin Collins, Keeneland	Paul and Rita Harper	Michael Dickinson and Joan Wakefield	Andrews Bowen Ltd.
Location	Lexington	England	North East, Md.	England
Web address	www.polytrack.com	www.equestriansurfaces.co.uk	www.tapetafootings.com	www.andrewsbowen.co.uk
Phone	859/254-3412	011-44 (0)1282 681722	410/287-8091	011-44 (0)1995 672103

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At the most recent meet in October, the surface played much fairer, as the track crew continued its learning experience. But on-track injuries were up a bit.

"I'd rather see no injuries, but I'm not sure we'll ever have that," Young said. "I still think this is the safest track in the country. We started something that 20 years down the road could be something so much better.


"It's not perfect, but it's as near perfect as anyone can come up with."

With synthetic racing surfaces in place at nine tracks with regular meets in North America, there are more track maintenance employees learning new things. Track superintendents have annual meetings, but now there is talk of having meetings to discuss synthetic-surface issues only.

Young said track superintendents frequently call each other to find out how the

surfaces are playing and to ask questions.

"We don't care if it's Cushion Track, Polytrack, or Tapeta—as long as it's best for the horses and it's safe," Young said. "There has been talk about starting a group so anybody with a synthetic track can talk about it.

"I've watched more races in the last year than I have in the 30 years I've been here. You're really interested in how things are going." 

Mick Peterson: Track Star

For the last two years, Dr. Michael "Mick" Peterson has become somewhat of a track star. The professor and graduate coordinator in mechanical engineering at the University of Maine has been hard at work teaching track superintendents how to properly maintain their newly installed synthetic surfaces.

Peterson said he has been called during all stages of race meets to inspect the safety of synthetic surfaces.

"They usually call me when they get nervous," said Peterson with a laugh. "Of the tracks that have been proactive, Del Mar is notable because they've always been supportive." He added he had been involved in the track's synthetic surface installation process since the beginning. "Not only has (Del Mar) always encouraged me to come out there, they've said, 'Share the data you've got with everybody and let's make the industry better.'"

When considering the various versions of synthetic surfaces, such as Cushion Track, Polytrack, and Tapeta, Peterson said he didn't have a particular preference.

"I think the challenge we've got is manufacturers adapting the mixtures to the climate—that process is not as sophisticated as it needs to be. There needs to be a focused effort, and we've seen some movement in that direction."

Peterson and internationally known equine surgeon Dr. Wayne McIlwraith have recently worked on a series of laboratory tests for Polytrack surfaces to use on a standard basis, and have talked with Cushion Track users about going through the same process.

"Quite simply, some of the challenges are just measuring the wax content in the track," Peterson said. "Turfway has been re-waxed two times, but right now there's no analytical statement that says you should add 2,000 gallons or 20,000 gallons (of wax). You just have to do it by trial and error. I'm trying to put numbers behind that right now.

"We're moving there, but it's much slower than I'd like to see... what I don't like about the synthetics is that we're just seeing too much variation with temperature and too much variation from venue to venue," he continued. "There's no reason in the long term why we shouldn't be able to figure out a way to keep them more consistent between surfaces."

Before the evolution of synthetic surfaces, when Peterson only evaluated dirt tracks, he primarily measured the moisture content in the soil. Assessing the temperature in synthetic surfaces is now a far more important element, however.

One of Peterson's recent methods for testing those surfaces has been to heat a sample, burn all the other elements off, and check

the sand to make sure it's the appropriate mixture for comparison. He is also working on being able to detect the amount of fiber, wax, and rubber in synthetic surfaces.

"My criticism of the industry is that we didn't develop this before," said Peterson. "I'm an engineer—an academic. I would have developed these (tests) before I put down the first track. Now we're getting to the point where we have horses on it and we're risking the horses, and suddenly it's like, 'Oh, quick—how much wax is in this?'"

Peterson said while creating and improving the synthetic surfaces across the country was an important concept, track superintendents shouldn't neglect the existing dirt surfaces at smaller venues.

"We're heavily dependent on the smaller tracks for genetic diversity," he said, "and they are never going to be able to afford the synthetics, and I'm not sure it's the best thing for them, anyway. There's a parallel effort here—we also need to make sure we make the best dirt track possible out there."

For nearly a decade, Peterson has collaborated with McIlwraith to evaluate track safety. The assignment was originally proposed by The Jockey Club's executive director, Dan Fick.

With Peterson's background in material-property measurements and McIlwraith's on the inner-workings of the horse, the two put their heads together for the first step of the project: discovering exactly how a horse's hoof hits the ground.

After years of trial and error, Peterson and McIlwraith developed a robotic hoof tester that they have used to evaluate most of the major synthetic and dirt tracks across the country since 2003.

The two main elements of the finished product are the ability to measure vertical stiffness of dirt and synthetic surfaces, which is associated with the likelihood of fractures, and horizontal shear strength, which is related to the risk of soft-tissue injuries. Both can be career-ending, which is why the hoof tester is designed to measure each one separately.

"It's good for diagnosing problems with the base and problems with the mixture, and it's also good for comparing between different tracks," Peterson explained.

Peterson noted that while there has never been a clear epidemiological study stating how synthetic surfaces are safer, there have been big improvements in their consistency compared to dirt tracks.

"What I think is the great success about synthetic surfaces and this whole movement is the fact the consistency on the track has dramatically improved around the track," said Peterson. "This is something that was badly needed." *By Esther Marr*



Dr. Mick Peterson with the robotic hoof tester

BENNETT & ASSOCIATES

Battle-Tested

BY MARK POPHAM

Europe boasts a longer history of all-weather surfaces

All-weather (synthetic surface) racing in the United Kingdom was first considered as a result of the harsh winter of 1984-85, in which 72 race days were lost at turf tracks due to inclement weather. The Levy Board estimated that abandonments cost the British racing industry more than £1.2 million in income that year.

The Jockey Club, then the ruling body of British racing, received seven submissions in February 1987 for the construction of all-weather tracks, including proposals for a new venue at Bournemouth on the south coast and an application to restore the racecourse at Stockton in the northeast, which had closed in 1981.

Following a lengthy selection process, Lingfield Park, which raced on grass on the flat and over jumps, was chosen in De-

cember 1988 as the first course to host all-weather racing in the UK.

Plans were soon in place at the Surrey venue to install an Equitrack surface, which had already been tried at Remington Park in Oklahoma. The Levy Board provided an interest-free £1.5-million loan to carry out the construction of this new track on the inside of the turf track.

Southwell, in Nottinghamshire, was picked as the second British racecourse in June 1989 to host all-weather racing, this time on Fibresand, despite concerns over kickback and the surface not having been used on a racecourse before.

The first all-weather card in the UK was held at Lingfield Oct. 30, 1989. The 12

races, all sponsored by bookmaker William Hill, attracted 155 runners, and the official going was described as "standard." Southwell hosted its initial all-weather raceday two days later.

Two cards a week were shared out between Lingfield and Southwell until January 1990, when all-weather racing took place every day until the end of March. Flat and jump races were staged on alternate days, with the latter consisting solely of hurdle races. Flat races were run between five and 16 furlongs, while hurdling took place between two and three miles.

In its first year of operation, all-weather racing generated £580,000 in extra revenue through levy payments, and was generally hailed a success, despite one Southwell card attracting only 94 paying customers. The Nottinghamshire track also suffered the embarrassment of losing two race cards due to fog and waterlogging, as well as no starting prices being returned for one race due to a lack of bets at the course.

While certain commentators and industry figures complained of racing "going to the dogs," a reference to Greyhound racing, the majority of jockeys and trainers praised the new concept, especially as it



Lingfield replaced its Equitrack with Polytrack in 2001; inset, racing at Southwell back in '90

gave them a regular income through the winter months. With four favorites winning on the first card at Lingfield and the longest-priced scorer returning at 8-1, bettors were also converted to racing on treated sand.

Trainers could run horses that were too lowly rated for turf handicaps, while horses were prepared for the turf season on the new surfaces. The winner of the Lincoln, the first major race of the turf season at Doncaster in March 1990, Evichstar was fit after four wins on the Fibresand at Southwell.

All-weather racing suffered a setback in 1994 when a study concluded that jump racing on an artificial surface was dangerous to horse and jockey. Southwell and Lingfield had witnessed 13 equine fatalities in the first two months of that year, and all-weather jumping was immediately stopped.

Flat racing on the all-weather continued to enjoy success. A third course came on stream when the turf course at Wolver-

TREVOR JONES PHOTOS

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

hampton was ripped up and replaced with Fibresand at the end of 1993. The venue hosted the first fixture under the lights in the UK Dec. 27 of that year. All-weather racing gained 125 days, spread evenly among the three tracks in 1995.

The popularity of all-weather racing continued to grow, as did the number of fixtures. Originally devised to guarantee racing in the cold winter months, Southwell, Lingfield, and Wolverhampton began running race cards throughout the year. Jockeys and trainers soon became all-weather specialists.

Changes in track technology also saw a far more reliable surface emerge. Lingfield replaced its aging Equitrack with Polytrack at the cost of £3 million in November 2001, and Wolverhampton also adopted the new surface in October 2004.



Racing under the lights over the synthetic surface at Wolverhampton

TREVOR JONES

Q&A with Michael Dickinson, owner, Tapeta Footings

How did you get involved in this?

My mentor was the great trainer Vincent O'Brien, who taught me about footings. He had two horses break down in 28 years. Then, steeplechase riding taught me a lot, because that is all about footing.

I spent 10 years in North America studying temperature differentials, which are much more dramatic here than in Europe. Only then did I put my surface down at my training center.

How is your product different from the others?

We use different fiber, waxes, and sand than the other products, and we use a different blend of materials depending on the location of the track. There are new waxes coming out for 2008 that we're very high on. We've put a lot of money and time into research and development, and our product is getting better all the time.

How has it been received at Presque Isle Downs and Golden Gate Fields?

At Presque Isle, it played fair for both speed horses and closers. The owners, trainers, and handicappers embraced it. There were two fatalities, both of whom had shipped in for racing after running on dirt tracks. Golden Gate is terrific at the moment, also playing fairly. It's a little firmer than I would like it. I'd like to slow it down by harrowing it a bit deeper. We also have two training tracks in Dubai, where it reaches 120 degrees, that are working well, and many horses have come off the training track at Fair Hill to win stakes races.

Have these surfaces met expectations?

We said we would reduce injuries by 50%, not eliminate them, and horsemen would be happy if we accomplish that. But you can't run five times on dirt and then run once on a synthetic surface and expect every injury to disappear.

Where is the market now for these surfaces?

We have lots of inquiries, but no racetrack manager is going to want to spend \$6 million on a new track unless there is pressure from owners and trainers. Fuller field sizes drive this, as do injuries, which make everyone look bad. The world press condemned America for running the Breeders' Cup on a sloppy track, and handle was down.

Are we in a learning curve still?

I'm fed up with that. Sure, you always learn something going forward, but I've learned plenty already. I've had it in and trained over it for nine years now in hot and cold. I've had nine years of lessons. The other question I always hear is, 'Are we going too fast?' We've been training on dirt for 100 years. If we go any slower, we'll be going in reverse. *By Lenny Shulman*



Michael Dickinson

Polytrack has generally proved a safe and consistent surface.


The quality of all-weather racing steadily increased. On July 9, 2005, the Ladbrokes Silver Trophy Stakes (Eng-III) became the first group race to be run on a British all-weather track, with Autumn Glory winning the mile contest at Lingfield by a neck from Court Masterpiece, who subsequently scored in group I company on turf.

The following year, the Winter Derby was upgraded to group III status at the same course, and the race became part of the European all-weather series.

The installation of a floodlit Polytrack surface at Kempton Park to the west of London in March 2006 saw two Guineas trials take place on the all-weather, with both the Easter Stakes and the Massaka Stakes attracting bumper entries.

At the other end of the scale, the introduction of "Regional Racing" in 2004 gave more opportunities for horses rated below 45 to run on the all-weather, a move that was popular among connections who faced the constant threat of being eliminated from other races. Although the scheme was dropped after a year, many fixtures on the all-weather still cater to horses toward the bottom of the ability scale.

A third of all flat race cards in the UK in 2006 took place on all-weather surfaces. Improved prize money has encouraged better horses to race, and the all-weather is no longer seen as a poor relation to racing on grass in Britain.

A fifth all-weather course is due to open in Britain next year, the much-delayed Great Leighs, while Ireland gained an all-weather course recently at Dundalk. France had a long tradition of racing on sand at Cagnes-sur-Mer on the south coast, but a regular all-weather venue at Deauville on the north coast only came on stream in 2003, while Pau in the southwest also offers all-weather racing. 

Cushion Cup

BY TOM LaMARRA AND KAREN JOHNSON

2008 will mark first Breeders' Cup on a synthetic surface

With the major Southern California racetracks having been mandated to install synthetic surfaces, it was only a matter of time before a Breeders' Cup World Championships would be run on something other than dirt and turf.

The first synthetic-surface Breeders' Cup will be held Oct. 24-25, 2008, at Santa Anita Park, which unveiled its Cushion Track

surface this year. Based on the two-day 2007 Cup, seven races traditionally run on dirt will be run on a synthetic surface.

The scenario will present options for owners and trainers with turf horses, or for those horses that have taken a liking to synthetic surfaces. It also could increase participation by European-based horses whose connections don't want them to run on dirt.

"I think it would affect more Europeans," said Pam Blatz-Murff, senior vice president of operations for Breeders' Cup. "Technically, I think we should have more interest. We are going to do extended work in Europe to bring more Europeans out."



Pam Blatz-Murff

Breeders' Cup is considering adding a turf sprint for 2008, and also may increase the purse of a \$250,000, one-mile turf stakes for 2-year-old fillies run for the first time as part of this year's two-day event.

"In two days (next year), we'll probably have more turf racing to entice Europeans, and you'll have a Cushion Track along with it," Blatz-Murff said.

Breeders' Cup president and chief executive officer Greg Avioli said the priority is safety, and he sees synthetic surfaces as a step in that direction. The early results from Santa Anita are encouraging, he said.



BENIOT & ASSOCIATES

The 2008 Breeders' Cup will be run over the Cushion Track surface at Santa Anita Park

"Unfortunately, we've had (on-track) breakdowns during the last two Breeders' Cups, and next year we hope to have a two-day event without any injuries," Avioli said. "And I think the dramatic increase in field size at Santa Anita shows horsemen really like that surface."

"There is a remote chance of getting rain in Southern California (in late October), but a synthetic surface would be in better shape than a traditional dirt surface. It could be more attractive to Europeans in that it might run more like turf than traditional dirt, and that could help participation."

California usually is well-represented at the World Championships, and next year, there could be even more participation. Some of the leading East Coast trainers in the United States have had some horses based there for years, and they offered different views of how the first synthetic Breeders' Cup could impact horses' schedules in 2008.

"I guess it's probably a little too early for me to know exactly, but I think by me having horses this winter in California—at Hollywood and Santa Anita—we will get a little bit of a line on how we want to approach it," trainer Todd Pletcher said. "Possibly, we will leave horses in California past April and continue to stay out there because of that. We are just going to have to play it by ear."

"But as far as what we have been able to identify by training horses at Churchill Downs on regular dirt and running (on Polytrack) at Keeneland or Turfway, we



Todd Pletcher

have had reasonable success. I don't think you necessarily have to have experience on it or train on it in order to run well on it. By the same token, I think you can train on it and not necessarily have an advantage.

"It seems to me that a lot of the horses train fine, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are going to run well in the afternoon on it. It looks like the tracks in California appear to play a little more like regular dirt surfaces. It doesn't look like speed is quite the detriment that it looked like it was at Keeneland, and I say that with Keeneland being fairer this fall than the meets prior to that."

Trainer Kieran McLaughlin said he's still trying to figure out the nature of synthetic surfaces, and would consider giving horses at least one start on the Santa Anita surface should he plan to enter them in Breeders' Cup races.

"I would love to train on it, but I don't look forward to racing on it as much just

because of the newness of it and what type of horse you need to handle it—speed or not speed, turf or dirt," said McLaughlin, who is based in New York, where the three New York Racing Association tracks have dirt surfaces. "It has been a little bit of a mystery and a question mark. As a trainer, you also have to be a good



Kieran McLaughlin

handicapper to know where to place your horses. So, I think it is a great surface for the horses soundness-wise, but again, it's about what type of horse you want to take there and run.

"As far as the Breeders' Cup being on it, we will as a team look to get a horse or two to run over a course similar to Santa Anita or at Santa Anita, and see how they handle it. For example, Lear's Princess won on the Polytrack at Keeneland, but it is different at Santa Anita. She's two-for-two on the turf, so where do you go? What do you do with her?"

"Somewhere along the summer, we

Q & A with Martin Collins, owner, Polytrack

How would you rate the tracks you've installed in North America?

People have to understand that these tracks are not all the same, and people are having their problems with different areas and the weather conditions. In this industry, you have to tailor-make these materials for the area you're in. We decide what goes down for each track in each area. You've got hot and cold temperatures, and you have to blend and mix these things accordingly; it's so important. The materials, especially the wax, will alter in different temperatures. It's important to get the right sand. We brought sand from the other side of the country for California (Del Mar). We tested the sand from California, and it was the wrong kind. There's a lot to learn in this game, and you don't learn it in five minutes.



Martin Collins

How about the problems at Woodbine and Turfway?

We're all learning as we go along, no doubt. But when we put something down and have a problem, we can rectify it, and we've done that. Sometimes you have to do adjustments. It's a new industry in America, and America is totally different from England or Dubai or the Far East; weather patterns are absolutely different, and you have to produce surfaces that will work in those areas. We're learning new things every day. We're doing a lot of research and development work, and getting scientific proof of what's happening.

Could Del Mar have done anything differently?

We were asked to produce a surface that would be safe, relieve the injuries, that they could race on, and water was an issue because of the cost of watering in California. And we produced a safe track that they could race on that didn't need water. They got what they asked for, but now they want faster times. They are sitting in a totally unique area there, with no protection from the sea and the cold air in the morning, when the waxes tighten. When the clouds move off and the sun comes up, the wax warms up and they go slower. It's a unique situation. If you want it faster in the afternoon, all you have to do is water it. It will tighten the wax and they'll get faster times. However, there's a point where safety is an issue; if you go too fast on any track, you're going to get injuries. There's a compromise there somewhere.

Have you been happy with the injury numbers so far?

Yeah, Del Mar was very safe; not a breakdown until the final weekend of the meet. At every other track we've put in, we've seen reductions of 50% in breakdowns during racing compared to the previous dirt tracks.

Were expectations for these tracks too high?

My opinion is Polytrack really does reduce injuries big time, but the way you race horses in this country is totally different from Europe. We don't inject our horses in Europe; we're not allowed to put drugs in them. The horses here run on a huge amount of drugs. A horse with an injury here, you inject him, but you're putting that horse under great stress and you're pushing him over the limit, and you'll get injuries that way. When they ban drugs, you'd find those horses wouldn't be running because you could see they were lame. The speed-crazy philosophy here is also a factor.

By Lenny Shulman

SYNTHETIC SURFACES

might have to go out there and see how it goes."

Trainer Bobby Frankel, who has horses in California and New York, said there is some similarity in the way dirt surfaces and Cushion Track at Hollywood Park and Santa Anita play.

"I would probably prep (for Breeders' Cup events) in California, but really, I don't think the tracks here are much different than regular dirt surfaces," Frankel said.



Bobby Frankel

"But I'm not sure how the horses at Belmont, with the sandy surface, will like it, and the track at Keeneland is definitely way different than (the Cushion Track at Santa Anita Park). We have \$32,000 claimers running in 1:07½ out here.

"I would keep horses (to prep) here, unless they like the track in New York. The Breeders' Cup is not the end-all. You can't concentrate (your schedule) upon the Breeders' Cup. You have to take your chances when they come. Too many people wait for that one day."

Breeders' Cup isn't planning to change entry rules given the advent of synthetic surfaces, Blatz-Murff said. At pre-entry time, horses can be cross-entered in two races and can be entered in two races if one is on Friday and the other on Saturday.

If a horse is entered in two races—that was the case this year with Forefathers, who was entered in the Friday Dirt Mile and the Saturday TVG Breeders' Cup Sprint (gr. I)—one of the entry fees is forfeited.

"I believe there will be some cross-entering between the Cushion Track and the turf, but that would probably affect a European rather than domestic trainer," Blatz-Murff said.

Pletcher believes 2008 will at least be

interesting given the synthetic-surface dynamic at Breeders' Cup.

"My main concern on any surface is that if you are going to run races at that magnitude, that it not be biased one way or another, like what we encountered at Churchill (in 2006) when it was so inside-speed-favoring," Pletcher said. "You don't want to distort the results because of the surface. But as long as it is fair and it's safe, I don't have a big problem with it.

"It will be interesting to see how some people enter their horses. Turf horses obviously will have turf options, but maybe (trainers of those horses) will look at synthetic options, or what have you."

Frankel indicated it's simply another phase in horse racing.

"I have mixed emotions about (synthetic) tracks," he said. "Now, there are so many synthetic tracks, so it gives everyone a chance. But I think the jury is still out on them. I'm not so sure that in 10 years we will still have them." 🐾

Handicappers: Tight Fisted

Owners, breeders, trainers, and jockeys are all trying to figure out the idiosyncracies of synthetic surfaces. So, too, are handicappers.

Synthetic surfaces have forced many regular players to adjust their wagering strategies, while others have continued to play the tracks that have the new surfaces, but more cautiously. Whether a \$2 or \$2,000 bettor, horseplayers are always looking for the same thing—consistency.

So far with synthetic surfaces, they have not found that, but all dirt tracks do not favor the same running styles or produce equal running times, either.

"Everyone has had to adjust. It certainly is not like the old days," said Craig Kaufman, a top tournament handicapper who lives in Hacienda Heights, Calif., a state that mandated its major Thoroughbred tracks install synthetic surfaces.

"If you are a good handicapper, you just have to adjust your handicapping," Kaufman, who plays Pick 6 carryovers throughout the country, added. "But certainly you cannot have as much confidence because there are so many unknown factors."

Andy Beyer, who popularized speed figures and is a well-known national handicapper, stays away from synthetic surfaces.

"I have not played a synthetic surface; I am avoiding them," Beyer said. "I've spent close to 50 years learning this game, and I'm not sure whether I want to devote the energy" to learning how to handicap synthetic surfaces.

From his perspective, Beyer said, the maintenance of the tracks is still questionable.

"There is clearly a radical difference in track maintenance," he said. "Keeneland has been as fast a racetrack as America has ever seen; Del Mar was about as slow as we have seen in normal weather conditions, and both are Polytrack."

He and Beyer Speed Figure colleagues have no trouble computing numbers for synthetic surface tracks, but the pace of races at some tracks has made it challenging, Beyer said. "We saw this most notably at Keeneland, when there was a perception that speed could not win, or that speed was a negative. All the jocks take a hold, and if they go a half in :51 or :52 on a fast surface, the final time is compromised. It seems to

have normalized, but the Keeneland April meet was very difficult.

"The number-one lesson is you don't want to bet a horse on dirt strictly on artificial surface form and vice versa. If a horse makes his debut at Keeneland, and runs a 90 (Beyer Speed Figure) and is 3-5 at Churchill, you have to bet against him."

Beyer is not the only one to find a difference in tracks with the same synthetic surface.

"I assumed Turfway form would transfer to Keeneland, and to me, that has not been the case," handicapper Mike Maloney, who regularly visits Keeneland, said of the two tracks, both of which run on Polytrack. "There are more variations on synthetic surfaces than turf courses. A

horse's best race and worst race on a synthetic surface seems to be a wider range than on traditional dirt or turf."

While Maloney, a Lexington resident, agreed synthetic surfaces might make handicapping a fairer game because there is a certain degree of "randomness that a lot of casual players will embrace," he also said it "turns off many serious players who see races where pace is no factor."

Maloney noted he has been playing Golden Gate Fields since it installed Tapeta Footings because he finds it "very formful. I am playing there with confidence."

Robert Palmer, a 25-year handicapper who lives in Richmond, Ky., and visits Keeneland for live and simulcast racing, said synthetic surfaces have "made it tougher on handicappers. You tend to play less money, and there is an uncertainty that leads you to feather, or spread," your wagers.

Bruce Fischbein, a regular simulcast player at Monmouth Park who handicaps for a living, is like many who enjoy the exercise so much they are approaching synthetic surfaces as merely another challenge.

"I try to look at them the same, be open-minded," Fischbein said. "I still try to find the best horse."

John Harris, who lives in Reno, Nev., and wagers at the Peppermill Hotel Casino, said all handicappers are "looking for an edge, so synthetic surfaces have forced us to look more at back form."

But Harris also said he is willing to try and understand the new surfaces because "they appear much safer, and the safety of the horses is always a big concern."

By Dan Liebman



Andy Beyer

MATT GOINS