

# New-age whip

Horse-friendly whips are making their way into American flat racing

by Liane Crossley

**T**HERECORD books should have closed on the third race at Delaware Park on June 23 shortly after the mid-level claiming event was declared official, but when jockey Jeremy Rose cracked his mount in the face with his whip near the finish line, the ordinary race became key evidence in the debate to ban whips.

Animal rights activists contend the whip constitutes unnecessary abuse, while traditionalists say the tool maximizes a horse's ability and is necessary to keep runners from veering off course. In between are those calling for restrictions such as limiting the number of strikes and where a horse can be struck such as the standards imposed in parts of Europe.

Another compromise in the whip debate is humane whips that do not cause the welts and stings inflicted by the traditional device. Mandatory in England and Ireland since 2007, the whips have been required in National Steeplechase Association races in the United States since '04.

For his whipping violation, Rose was suspended 90 days, fined \$5,000, and required to attend anger-management classes.

## Whip history

The Delaware Thoroughbred Racing Commission, which imposed the penalties, is a pioneer in humane whip use. About three years ago, commission member Duncan Patterson suggested that flat jockeys could use the forgiving whips used by steeplechase riders.

"Jockeys can be stronger than they think," said Executive Director John Wayne, adding that the commission saw no reason for not trying the humane whip.

After some experimental rides, jockeys concluded that the whips used in steeplechase racing were too short for flat racing.

"Flat riders need a longer whip because they sit so far forward," Wayne said.

A jockey aiming for a horse's rump will strike the flank instead with a shorter whip, so the new whips were

modified for flat races.

The advent of a whip that does not harm horses can be traced to England three decades ago, where James Mahon of the Point-to-Point Owners Association urged officials to punish jockeys who beat their horses unnecessarily. Such beatings caused a public outcry in 1980. Five years later, Mahon observed an unplaced runner bleed from welt marks and realized the whip itself was as much to blame as the user and concluded that a humane whip would eliminate the problem.

He began making experimental cushioned whips and caused a stir with one of his early demonstrations to racing executives in 1992. Mahon shattered a glass pane with a standard whip, but demonstrated that his innovative model could not.

In 1997, Mahon began manufacturing his AIRCUSH whip. The following year, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals recommended the adoption of humane whips following their high-profile use in show jumping and racing. On April 1, 2007, humane whips were made mandatory in the United Kingdom.

## Steeplechase first

Steeplechase jockeys in the U.S. have made a smooth transition to using cushioned whips since the National Steeplechase Association passed a rule mandating their use four years ago.

Matt McCarron, a champion steeplechase jockey, said using a cushioned whip is the same as using a standard whip. He uses the ProCush brand manufactured by Old Mill Whips in Ireland.

"The biggest difference between a ProCush and a regular whip is that it is basically impossible to mark a horse with a ProCush whip," he said. "When I rode early in my career with a regular whip, through inexperience I would hit a horse in the soft part of the flank and leave welts and in some cases draw blood. With a ProCush whip, it is virtually impossible to do anything like that."

He said horses react the same to a cushioned whip as they would to a

## Humane whips

- Harmless to horses
- Will not cause welts
- Make loud popping sound
- Horse's response is same as to traditional whip
- Mandatory in U.S. steeplechase races and in England and Ireland
- Used by many leading U.S. jockeys

traditional whip that has a stiff, leather "popper" at the end. Humane whips have a popper about half the length of the shaft so that strikes are absorbed by the whip instead of the horse. The principle is similar to using large, flat snowshoes that distribute weight as opposed to sinking in snow wearing only boots.

"I have found no difference whatsoever," McCarron said. "The ProCush whips are designed to sound like a firecracker. When you hit them, it makes a loud pop. Horses respond to the sound as opposed to being stung by it."

## Flat race testimonial

James Lopez is one of many pioneers who ride with humane whips in flat races. Among the leading riders at Colonial Downs this season, Lopez has ridden in nearly 8,000 races and said he needed some time to adjust to using a modern whip.

"It took a while for me to get used to it," he said. "It is stiffer than what I was used to."

He said despite the loud popping sound of the whip, other horses in the field do not spook from it. Although there are anecdotal stories of cushioned whips lacking durability, Lopez rides exclusively with a single ProCush and has not had to replace it.

On June 21, an experiment was quietly conducted at Colonial when all ten jockeys in the afternoon's fifth race carried ProCush whips.

"All of the riders liked it, but some of them said it was too short," said Frank Petramalo, executive director of the Virginia Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association.

Javier Castellano did not participate in the optional claiming event



Hoofprints Inc. photo

## SHORT END OF THE STICK

Traditional whips have a small, stiff "popper" that can cause welts or bleeding, while humane whips have a popper about half the size of the shaft that absorbs the shock while making a firecracker-like sound

but was so intrigued that he borrowed one for the following race and won aboard a 9-to-1 longshot.

"To my eye, the ProCush whips are made of good material," he said. "It is like a car with leather seats—you can tell they are good seats."

Others brands are coming on the market. The LITETOUCH that sells for about \$65 is manufactured by Cherry Hill, New Jersey-based Whips International.

"We are refining it all the time," said Whips International Managing Member James Walford, who has been making whips for 30 years. "It is important to get the feel, the weight, and balance correct. We will make the whip until you are happy. I have made a whip as many as ten times for people."

An early problem with revolutionary whips was lack of durability that can be attributed to track surface.

"They are fine on the turf," Wayne said, "but on the dirt, the sand can be abrasive and when they are washed after a race it is like power-washing them."

Delaware Park has been using the humane whips for two races every day.

"The riding colony has been very supportive," Wayne said. "They want


to be proactive in protecting the animals, and they like the padded popper."

Jockeys' Guild Regional Manager Jeff Johnston said that although the Thoroughbred industry in general is reluctant to change, most jockeys are open-minded to the idea of whips that do not cause harm. He took a dozen LITETOUCH whips to Ellis Park in July and said about 14 riders used them on a voluntary basis.

"I have had mixed reviews," he said. "Some feel the need for change is unwarranted because the whip is not as severe as we are led to believe. We are working hard with whip manufacturers to get the right specifications, and the jockeys have been very helpful in trying to get this done. These whips are softer and easier on the horse, and if it is good for the horses and good for the industry, I'm all for it." \*



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