

TDN Q&A

Tom Ventura, general manager and director of sales at the Ocala Breeders' Sales Company, recently sat down for a Q&A session with the *TDN's* Steve Sherack to discuss the upcoming OBSMAR sale and more. The two-day auction kicks off at 2 p.m. Tuesday.



There are 183 fewer lots catalogued for this year's OBSMAR sale than in 2009. Was the cutback by design or more of a result of pinhookers scaling back at the 2009 yearling sales?

We didn't change our criteria. We wanted to stick with what has worked for us and concentrate on the quality. If it resulted in fewer horses, like it did, that was fine with us. We didn't want to lower the standards just to have more horses.

Can you discuss the quality of the catalogue?

The catalogue is solid. I think there's a good mix of horses. There's solid pedigrees and physically, I think, people will be happy when they come here.

Coming off the heels of the Fasig-Tipton Calder sale--which realized healthy gains in average and median--what are your expectations for the March sale? Do you think the momentum will carry over?

You would hope so, and I think this will be a broader test of the market. It's hard to really use the first two sales as a gauge, because the number of horses [catalogued]--there were only 160 in our sale [OBSFEB] and a little more than 200 at the Fasig-Tipton [Calder] sale. It's really hard to make any solid projections or conclusions to where the market is, but I think this will be a fair test. I think we've got the horses, and in earlier sales you did see plenty of interest in the barn area; it didn't always translate into a sale, but there seems to be genuine interest in the horses.

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The Safetrack synthetic surface is going on its third season at OBS now. Are you happy with it/has it met expectations?

We're very happy with it. We made an effort after last year to tone it down a bit. It's a learning process on how to maintain these tracks. It's a naturally quick surface, but we've got a maintenance program set up to where we're very happy with it. It was noticeably slower in the February sale this year compared to last year. I think it's a very fair racetrack and it handles the weather well. We haven't had any problems with the surface. The consignors are happy with it. There haven't been any issues with the horses coming off the track. As far as our surface goes, we couldn't be happier--especially on a rainy day. That racetrack stays the same from beginning to end. We've got the horses performing on a level field, or at least a field where the buyers can gauge them accurately...Unfortunately, a lot of the synthetics are getting lumped in with what's happening at one racetrack [Santa Anita]. Every synthetic track isn't the same, just like every dirt track isn't the same. I don't think it's the surface at Santa Anita; I think it's pretty common knowledge that the drainage seems to be the problem.

Was the weather--specifically the threat of rain during the breeze shows--the reason why OBS chose to install a synthetic surface?

That was a part of the reason. The most important part is the welfare of the horses. We felt strongly that Safetrack was a surface that was kind on the horses. [Being able to handle the rain] was certainly a bonus in our situation where these horses are to run on a specific day. We have a little bit of wiggle room in terms of moving the works one day back if we don't have good weather, but it's not like you can scratch and run the horse two weeks later. I think it's fair for the consignors, and it's nice to be able to give the buyer's some confidence that the horse that worked at 10 a.m. was over the same track as 3 p.m.

The OBS February sale saw a new buyer in Chuck Sandford come in and land the topper at \$475,000. Amy Tarrant, predominantly a yearling shopper, was also very active at the top of the market. Has OBS done anything differently to recruit new buyers?

We try and spread the word as best we can through the traditional ways. Since last year, we have also had representation on the racetrack. We try and reach out and cultivate customers and follow up on the existing customers that have had some success and let them know what we have for this go around...We do have some interest from overseas for the March sale. We've got credit in for some Japanese-based buyers, so hopefully they will participate.

Ventura Q&A cont.

With the majority of prospective buyers coming from out of town, are there any restaurants or attractions you recommend for them to see while in Ocala?

Well, my wife's a good cook, but I don't want them to come over my house [laughs]. One of things that seems to be popular is that several of the local hotels have the breeze videos right on one of the television channels. So you can be sitting in the Hilton, or the Residence Inn, and you flip to channel 16, and you can watch the videos until you fall asleep. As far as dining options, I know Mark's Prime Steaks is a popular destination.