

TDN Q&A

TDN Q&A: DEL MAR'S JOE HARPER

Two weeks into its seven-week meet, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club can boast plenty of positives. With an average of 20,737 people passing through the turnstiles each day, track attendance is up nearly 5% from 2010, which in turn was up 4.2% from 2009. Field size--always a concern in California--is averaging of 8.3 horses per race, up from 8.1 horses, and handle, the most important metric, is nearly equal to a year ago, with daily all-sources handling averaging \$11.7 million per day. The *TDN* talked with Del Mar Thoroughbred Club CEO, President and General Manager Joe Harper earlier this week about the meet's strong start, Del Mar's new "Ship and Win" program, its popular concert series, and his assessment of the sometimes beleaguered Polytrack surface at Del Mar.



Benoit photo

Two weeks in, how are you feeling about Del Mar's current meet?

Harper: I think we're all pleasantly surprised things are going as well as they are. Certainly, the \$1,000 incentive program [the "Ship and Win Program"] seems to be working; we're seeing some new faces, and they're bringing new horses. [Del Mar's Executive Vice President for Racing and Industry Relations] Tom Robbins was pleasantly surprised the entries are going as well as they are.

Tell us a little about the "Ship and Win" program, which has drawn roughly 100 new horses to Del Mar's backstretch.

Harper: Del Mar gives you \$1,000 if you ship in from another state, plus we'll give you a 20% bonus on anything you might win in that particular race [excluding stakes races]. Guys like Dallas Keen have shown up with a bunch of horses, and there are a number of other trainers we don't usually see here who are taking advantage of it. It's a pretty good way to pay for your shipping, and we basically have the highest purses in the country, so it's worth it to show up.

What are some other things Del Mar has been doing?

Harper: The Friday Night Concert series has been successful, as have the Saturday concerts. Ziggy Marley was here last Saturday and brought in 32,000 people, and a lot of them bet. Our opening-day attendance was our biggest ever at Del Mar, which was pretty cool, and our on-track handle that day was up 9.5%, so I'm assuming the Silicon set are betting a little more. Usually they're just partying, and the handle is reflective of the fact it's a crowd of first-time racegoers, coming for the excitement, rather than to gamble. But we were cooking right along.

That has been an old argument against things like a concert series: that it attracts people who often don't bet. What's Del Mar's thinking on this?

Harper: You have to do anything you can to draw people in. We're obviously trying to wrap our product in as attractive a package as we can, and I think we've been fairly successful at it. San Diego is a great market. The market is small enough to give you a lot of attention, and big enough to support you. Over the last 10 years or so, we've put all of our efforts into branding our product in that market, and it's proven successful. A lot of the first-time people who come to the track, it's a great experience for them. They say, 'Well, I don't have to just sit around and look at a racing form I don't understand, I can go watch a concert or laugh at a cougar contest or whatever, and have a good time.' But more and more, we're seeing those people who come for the Friday night concerts arrive earlier, and gambling a little bit, and we're seeing some reasonable action from those newcomers.

Officials at Hollywood and Santa Anita recently asked for the support of the Thoroughbred Owners of California to reduce the takeout rate on exactas and quinellas (from 22.68% to 21.68%) and daily doubles (from 22.68% to 15.43%). What's your take?

Harper: I think the takeout on some of the bets--exactas and doubles--are a little high. You hate being out there at the highest takeout in those categories, even if you're the lowest in a lot of other categories. But those particular bets I think we should revisit and lower [takeout] to some degree. How much, I don't know. We have to figure the point where we can lower the takeout while not hurting our purses or profit. If it generates more handle because we've lowered it, then we're in pretty good shape. It isn't our call or Santa Anita's or Hollywood's alone--it's all of our calls, including the horsemen. I haven't talked to anyone from any of those sides, including the racing board, who said, 'No, we're absolutely not going to lower the takeout again.'

The Polytrack surface at Del Mar has at times drawn widely differing opinions from horseman, handicappers and fans. Are you happy with the way it has been performing this year?

Harper: I'm happy with it, but it's not really whether I'm happy with it, it's whether the horsemen are. Right now, I think we're in pretty good shape. I'm out there every morning talking to the exercise riders, jockeys and trainers, and probably 90% of the people are very positive about it. They think we're doing the right thing, and it's playing well. But all tracks, whether they're synthetic or sand, are a moving beast, and you have to have a maintenance plan that's flexible and works to keep the track as consistent as possible. Don't ask me why, but every track I've dealt with in my 40 years of management, you put it to bed one night and it's the greatest track in the world, and the next morning, you're saying 'What the hell happened?' I think Rich Tedesco, our track superintendent, does a great job.

How many fatalities have you had this year?

Harper: I think we've lost two horses, one in training before we opened the track, and one in the races. But you have to look at each one. The trainer of the one, Matt Chew, said he loved the track, and no one was blaming the racetrack.

And the other breakdown was in the Sunday, July 24 finale, in which the horse who broke down was coming off an extended layoff.

Harper: You're always holding your breath with the ones that have been off for a year or more, and have been training off site. You'd like to get as many works on the surface they're going to run on as possible. But we take a harder look at those horses with our vets. We have all kinds of vet checks in the mornings and afternoons, and those guys do a hell of a job. And I don't know--that horse may have looked perfectly fine.

-L Marquardt