

TDN Q&A

Owner Bill Casner is leading the charge to rid the sport of legal race day medications. While several major owners have vowed to run their 2-year-olds Lasix free, Casner races all of his horses without Lasix or bute. A very successful businessman and one of the most prominent owners in the sport, Casner is convinced he is doing the right thing not just for the sport but for his horses. The TDN sat down with Casner recently to get his take on the anti-Lasix battle, how his horses are doing without drugs and whether or not the sport is ready to go medication free.

TDN: We recently watched Endorsement run in the Whitney without Lasix and win the GIII Texas Mile without the drug. Tell us more about him and what you have done with your stable.

BC: All my horses run without race day medication and that's been my policy for about a year and a half. It was a personal decision on my part. I felt like it was in the best interests of my horses and I feel that long term it's in the best interests of our industry to wean our horses off race day meds. Times have changed and the public is becoming increasingly intolerant of medication in sports. It is characterized as a therapeutic medication, but I feel that the side effects of Lasix are far more detrimental to the horse than any therapeutic benefits. It is time that our industry became a medication-free industry.

There are a group of us that we have recruited, a growing number of owners that have committed to running their horses without race day medication. The list includes some of the biggest names in racing, Darley, Juddmonte, Frank Stronach, Claiborne Farm. We have about 75 owners that have committed to running their two year olds without race day meds.

TDN: A lot of owners have said that they would like to race without Lasix, but feel that by doing so they would be at a competitive disadvantage. By going medication free, are you at a disadvantage?

BC: Not at all. I feel like my horses are able to compete more effectively.

There have been some studies done that indicate that Lasix may be performance enhancing. I think in earlier times when Lasix was allowed to be given closer to race time, two hours or less before a race, it may have been performance enhancing. Over the last few years the rule has changed and Lasix cannot be administered after four hours out. When you give a horse Lasix, you are inducing dehydration through horses urinating away many pounds, and that may be considered a weight advantage.

Bill Casner Q&A cont.

The fact is, when you dehydrate before an athletic performance, it is counterintuitive to proper physiology or optimum physiology for a horse to perform at its best.

I think any competitive advantage is negated. Horses experience extreme potassium loss when they are given a diuretic. Anybody that has ever taken Lasix, and I have asked a number of people, say it makes them feel weak, makes them feel bad. What we've seen in our horses post race is that these horses lose a tremendous amount of weight. We weigh them the morning after they've hydrated all night long, and horses will lose anywhere from 35 pounds on up. A bucket of water weighs 40 pounds and these horses will usually drink a couple of buckets of water from the time they're cooled out until the next morning. They've consumed 80 pounds of water, yet still they've lost 35 pounds on up.

We had one filly last summer that lost 100 pounds. No one could believe she lost that much weight, so we walked her across the scales twice to verify. She had only been administered 3 cc's of Lasix. She ran in Chicago and won the race, yet lost 100 pounds. Trainers in this day and age understand that it takes anywhere from four weeks to seven or eight weeks to recover from a race. In earlier days, horses ran every two weeks. That was ideal and that was because they didn't have to deal with the metabolic stress of dehydration combined with the stress of a race. I really feel like my horses are healthier and happier and are running well.

TDN: What about your trainers? Was it difficult to convince them to compete without Lasix?

BC: Eoin Harty trains the bulk of the my horses and Shannon Ritter and Bob Dunham train a couple for me. All of them were very receptive. Eoin had run horses in Dubai without Lasix and comes from a European background and understands that horses perform very well without Lasix. We won the Dubai World Cup with Well Armed and Well Armed ran the biggest race he ever ran in his life without Lasix. Eoin was very receptive to it. In fact, my horses aren't the only ones in his stable that run without Lasix

TDN: While you may have convinced Eoin Harty that running without Lasix is a plus, the majority of trainers are adamant that they have to have it, despite the evidence you have provided. Why do you think so many trainers believe Lasix is vital?

BC: We have a whole generation of trainers and owners that have never run a horse without it. In their hearts they truly believe these horses cannot perform without it. They are creatures of habit and they go through certain routines before they run their horses and once they establish a routine that they feel comfortable with, a routine that they've won races with, they want to keep using that same routine. They truly believe that a majority of their horses will bleed.

Bill Casner Q&A cont.

We've scoped our horses after they run and only a small percentage have bled. About 10% of our horses have bled after running without Lasix. One of the contributing factors, and I don't have any science or data to support this, but we have seen with the horses that have bled is that a common factor is that we have administered butazolidin the day before. Now, we don't run with bute, either. Bute is a very caustic drug. It's not even used in human medicine much anymore. It is a drug



Bill & Susan Casner
Benoit photo

that has whole litany of side effects. We have found that by removing both meds that our horses are not bleeding and are running very well. Horses will be moving good and training well, yet trainers will give them bute in case they have some sort of niggling soreness. I believe that butazolidin is a medication that most horses don't need.

TDN: The anti-Lasix camp has gained a lot of momentum recently. Do you believe that, say within four or five years, the sport will actually be drug-free, at least at the highest levels?

BC: Change generally takes time. You have to take baby steps. With the commitment the owners have made, with a group that continues to grow that has pledged to run their 2-year-olds without Lasix, that is an important step. It becomes a re-education process. When an owner asks his trainer not to run on Lasix and the horse performs well and does not bleed, the trainers will start to understand that perhaps this isn't a necessity, that giving a horse Lasix isn't as paramount as they thought. It will happen. This will be the first year the Breeders' Cup will run the 2-year-old races without Lasix, Kentucky has passed a rule that in 2014 the 2-year-old stakes races will not be run with Lasix. New York, possibly, will be the next state to follow. As one state goes, I think they will all go over a period of time.