



op/ed

by barry irwin

POLYTRACK HARD TO WATCH

by Barry Irwin

I will leave it up to analysts more qualified than me to figure out whether Polytrack is safer than dirt, even though the initial evidence suggests that the synthetic surface has already saved the lives of many of our equine warriors.

From my narrow perspective, however, if somebody can tell me the good part about watching races on Polytrack, I for one would love to hear about it.

When I asked this question of Keeneland's Rogers Beasley a few years ago, he told me that he longed for the days when Keeneland sold the offspring of such sires as Blushing Groom, Riverman and Lyphard, instead of some current horses whose names do not immediately send goose bumps up one's spine. He said he was tired of cheap American speed sires dominating the sire lists and sales catalogues.

I also have heard my good friend Bill Casner tell me that there is nothing more boring than watching a speed horse go to the front on dirt and lead home a parade of horses that never change position during the course of a race. (When I witnessed his Well Armed do just that to score as dominating victory in the World Cup as we have seen on the dirt since Secretariat won the Belmont Stakes, the irony slammed me right between the eyes.)

Polytrack, I guess, is supposed to render racing less boring by blunting speed and making races more interesting.

As much as Beasley and Casner want to get away from dirt, that is how much I want to flee having to watch races on the Poly.

I have three major reasons, as follows:

First and foremost, I think that the proliferation of Polytrack is harmful to the selection process of breeding Thoroughbreds.

Secondly, I think that racing on Polytrack robs the sport of a great deal of its beauty.

Finally, I think racetracks are relying on the synthetic surface too much when there is a threat of rain.

How, one may wonder, could Polytrack mess up the selection process?

Polytrack is such a forgiving surface that it allows crooked-legged horses with glaring conformation defects to perform at a high level regardless of their infirmities or deficiencies.

One need only look at The Pamplemousse and General Quarters, two of the higher-rated contenders for this year's Kentucky Derby. I cannot recall the last racehorse of any quality that moved as badly as The Pamplemousse. I found it absolutely excruciating to watch him compete. General Quarters has the most tortured reverse corkscrew motion on his right foreleg one is ever likely to see in a horse that has ability.

These two animals would be severely compromised if they had to prove themselves solely on dirt on the road to the Triple Crown. The Pamplemousse has already departed the scene, without ever being subjected to racing on anything other than a synthetic surface. If my guess is right, General Quarters may next in line.

One could argue the positive merits of Polytrack or other synthetic surfaces for prolonging the careers of bad-legged and bad-moving racehorses that might otherwise not be able to make it to a high level of competition.

If we are racing horses in order to test them and improve the breed, do we not want to weed out the culls and try to breed the best-legged, best-moving stock possible? Is this not what all stockmen strive for?

How in the hell are breeders supposed to figure out which stallions to use, if the choice is between horses that ran only on Polytrack?

Breeders are in enough of a quandary because of the proliferation of permissive medication to try to figure out which racehorses at the highest level achieved their success with or without the help of performance enhancing drugs.

Toss in Polytrack and a breeder must surely throw his hands in the air and cry uncle.

As for beauty, I personally was drawn to the sport of racing because I like watching an athlete that moves well. The fluidity and grace of a top Thoroughbred is second to no other athlete in competition. Yet, when one is subjected, at a high level of competition, to witnessing the desperate action of bad-moving horses, the joy is replaced by anguish.

The substitution of an awkward-moving beast flailing his legs in every which direction for a speed horse skipping clear of his rivals by dint of his superior action is a trade off that I am having difficulty embracing. Polytrack makes the game ugly and robs the sport of its beauty. Is this what people really want?

Finally, there is the increased use of Polytrack by Keeneland as a substitute for grass racing anytime the weather forecast hints at measurable precipitation. Last week, some allowance races at Keeneland were switched from turf to Polytrack, as Keeneland feared the runners might cut up the course.

Geez, does Keeneland race enough days in the spring to have to worry about that happening? Halfway through the meet, they find it necessary to worry about a grass course that survived several years with rarely ever having to move a race off the turf?

Op/Ed cont.

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Well, I suspect the answer has more to do with Keeneland's desire to promote a product they are manufacturing and selling than saving a virtually pristine and time-tested grass course.

Polytrack is not turf. All turf horses do not act on Polytrack. I would concur that if a race does have to be moved from turf to dirt that a synthetic surface would be preferable to a wet dirt surface. But I would argue strongly that anytime a drop of water hits the greensward that a race should be moved. There are horses that prefer different types of footing and to deny a horse that acts on soft turf an opportunity for a good performance because of Keeneland's commercial agenda is unfair to the connections of that horse.

Perhaps the best thing about the current economic downturn is that few, if any, racing associations are in a position to spend the money required to install Polytrack.

This respite, hopefully, also will allow racing people a chance to reflect on the merits and failings of the synthetic revolution and make wiser decisions moving forward.

American-bred horses used to be the envy of the world for their toughness and their speed. Now, internationally, they are a joke and our racing form is not considered to be top-class, because we have weakened our breed by being unable to properly make intelligent decisions on matings due to permissive medication and PEDs.

If the synthetic revolution does take hold, it could be the final nail in the coffin. And if Keeneland thinks that this is going to help them in the sales ring, they are sadly mistaken.

Comments? Please email the TDN management at suefinley@aol.com.