



op/ed

by jerry brown

THIS ONE'S FOR CHARLIE

Recently, it has become very trendy to offer opinions as to how to solve the drug problem in our industry (note that I did not say sport). As someone who has been fighting this fight since long before most of those who are now offering opinions even knew there was a problem, who worked with the only group that has ever made a serious attempt to deal with the problem (The Jockey Club Safety and Integrity Committee), and who will be dealing with the issue--the real one--long after most of you are done with it, I can tell you there are a few important points that need to be made.

1--Banning drugs does nothing to stop drug use.

The drugs that are being used by cheaters to win races are banned now. How's that working out? Well, since most of you don't handicap seriously, I suggest you ask anyone who bets real money (my handle is over a million a year), or trains for a living. They will give you the names of two or three trainers and vets at their local track who are getting spectacular improvements out of horses on a regular basis.

2--Don't make assumptions about competence and integrity. In this business, in my opinion, they are almost always wrong.

You know what DOES stop drug use? Serious testing and enforcement. You know what's not being done? You guessed it.

A couple of quick stories. First, in the late '90s, it became known that alkalizing agents, in the form of what were known as milkshakes, were being used to move horses up. This news got quite a bit of attention, especially when my friend, the late Charlie Harris, wrote a piece in the *Blood-Horse* asking why the drug wasn't banned in Kentucky. So there was a flurry of activity, and Kentucky banned the drug. Shortly thereafter, they also announced they were going to start testing for the drug...if you count six years later as shortly thereafter. You read that right.

But Pennsylvania was even more on the ball. They announced they were going to start TCO2 (milkshake) testing in 2010. Now, think about this for a minute. How many people do you think bet how much money on the races between, say, 2005 and 2010 in Pennsylvania, assuming the horses were being tested for the most basic, well-known performance enhancer? Do you think that maybe the tracks there, which were taking a share of every dollar bet, had a responsibility to do at least that?

Or...how about the track that hosted the Breeders' Cup a few years ago, where the guy who took the samples for TCO2 testing quit on opening day of the meet. And was not replaced. When this was brought up by a prominent racing journalist, the track confirmed it, but said they were going to test "some random horses" in the Breeders' Cup races. And maybe they did. And maybe not. Since the test results weren't published, who knows?

Then there's the track hosting a Triple Crown race that, as of 2008, was only testing two horses a day...and taking the blood for the TCO2 tests post-race, when the levels have gone down, and you pretty much can't get a positive.

3--Unless it's done in conjunction with other steps, banning Lasix could cause a whole lot more problems than it solves.

My guess is that not many of you reading this were betting horses seriously before Lasix was made legal, or after it was, but when it was still hard to get information about who was racing on the drug. Back in those days, there were some astounding form reversals, where horses that had been stopping all of a sudden ran off the screen. Those horses were invariably heavily bet, because someone knew they had been treated. There are other drugs that can stop bleeding if Lasix is banned, but unlike with Lasix, the public will not be aware who is treated with them, because they won't be listed in the program. Get ready for some great form reversals, and a lot of noise from disgruntled bettors.

4--The first step towards getting a handle on the drug problem is to publish all test results, in detail, on a timely basis.

Whatever the sport, whether baseball, cycling or horse racing, there will always be people who try to cheat. Those people are not the problem. In our business, where as I said, assumptions turn out to be a really bad idea, the problem is that those who have a responsibility to stop the cheaters have been criminally negligent--they are not the solution, they are the problem itself. Before anything serious can be done about drugs, we need to nail down the facts about exactly what is and is not actually going on with testing and enforcement. We need to know what horses are being tested, what drugs they are being tested for, what tests are being done (whether blood or urine tests for Clenbuterol, for example), and what the test results are--the actual readings, not pass/fail. There are people who will fight this tooth and nail, because if it comes to pass they will be forced to actually do their jobs, and spend money to do them right. But if this is not done, literally nothing else that is done will be meaningful. And if Lasix ends up being banned, this step is even more important, for obvious reasons.

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