



op/ed

by fred pope

PROTECTING THE BREED

This is a tough time for Oliver Wills. He can't sleep. His annual review is approaching and he will be asked to grade his own job performance last year, then to present his plan for the next two to five years.

Oliver Wills's job is to protect the Thoroughbred breed in North America.

Most people don't know Ollie. He is an industry veteran who works in the background. His performance isn't easy to judge, it plays out over generations.

For the past three decades, Ollie's job has been increasingly difficult. With the legalization of Bute, then Lasix and other meds, the ability to "prove the breed" has been clouded, if not completely blurred.

There is no Oliver Wills, is there? There is no job to protect the Thoroughbred breed in North America.

Most would say it is The Jockey Club's job to protect the breed. Of course they maintain the breed registry and affirm parentage, but they don't protect the breed in North America, because they have no role in racing.

Thoroughbreds are performance-based. Breeding theories must be proven on the racetrack; around the world it is done with the best 2-year-old and 3-year-old races.

When I started out at the Thoroughbred Record in 1972, the saying of the day was, "We are trying to improve the breed". That conversation is still going on in other countries, but I haven't heard it here in a very long time.

This isn't about our past. This is about our future.

The series of articles in the New York Times will bring intense scrutiny and perhaps Federal intervention to stop performance enhancing drugs in racing. As the Times points out, the greatest abuse is in states with Racinos at the lowest levels in various horse breeds.

A Federal ban on performance enhancing drugs would go far in cleaning up racing, but would it go far enough to "protect the breed"? In the sausage making of legislation, would bleeding meds be allowed as therapeutic?

The NY Times has additional pieces in this series. With the Kentucky Derby on the horizon, publicity and politicians will merge on the issue and there will be a degree of chaos in the industry.

In the midst of the coming storm, TOBA and its American Graded Stakes Committee, will meet in a couple weeks and discuss whether alternative strategies should be used this year to ban all meds and peds in 2-year-old graded stakes.

Last week, I made my case for a new TOBA strategy (click [here](#)) that could do the unthinkable.

It could bypass state regulatory approval, by requiring the racehorse owners make their 2-year-olds eligible to receive graded status. Sanctioning would be between only TOBA and the racehorse owner.

When they meet, TOBA Trustees will discuss many issues. Without question they will be caught in the swirl of emotion and media coverage around the NY Times series and the efforts for Federal legislation to ban drugs from racing.

Although it is a theory, I believe the TOBA Trustees can walk and chew gum at the same time. They can meet the deadline, fast approaching, of the first 2-year-old graded stakes with a new strategy that achieves the drug-free objective AND they can start discussing and working on a future in all racing without drugs.

To walk the talk, how about every TOBA Trustee that continues as a Trustee, make their 2-year-olds eligible for graded status in 2012? That sends a clear message that TOBA is stepping up to protect the breed.

So, in the absence of anyone already having the job to protect the Thoroughbred breed in North America, I nominate TOBA's American Graded Stakes Committee (AGSC).

If you agree, then please contact the six TOBA members on the eleven member AGSC, because if they vote to require racehorse owners make their 2-year-olds eligible for graded status, which means they will be Super-tested, then it is a done deal for 2012.

The AGSC will have achieved their objective: Every 2-year-old in North America earning graded status in 2012 was free of medication and performance enhancing substances.

Breeders will start the process of proving the breed by culling out bleeding traits and open our market to international standards. We will not only be in harmony with the other countries, but in addition, the 2012 graded stakes will be apples to apples with the 2-year-old Breeders' Cup races.

Then in 2013, the AGSC will lead the way in protecting the breed through all the 3-year-old graded stakes leading to our Classic races.

The job performance of TOBA and the AGSC will be reviewed annually and like everyone with accountability knows, they may have some sleepless nights.

It will take all of our wills to change racing in a way that is meaningful for breeders.

Let's mark 2012 on the calendar as the year TOBA and its AGSC did move to protect the Thoroughbred breed. And once again in North America, have a conversation about improving the breed.

The six members of TOBA on the American Graded Stakes Committee are:

David Richardson, M.D., Chairman
John Amerman
William Farish, Jr.
Seth Hancock
Mike Levy
Peter Willmott