



op/ed

by barry irwin

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

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Eight and a half years ago, I wrote an Op-Ed piece for *The Blood-Horse* in which I urged the racing industry to strongly consider using the United States Anti-Doping Association as a national watchdog for horse racing.

Yesterday, Senator Tom Udall and Representative Joe Pitts of Pennsylvania announced legislation for a proposed new law that had as its centerpiece use of USADA to reign in the runaway drug culture that has infested Thoroughbred, Quarter Horse and Standardbred backstretches across the width and breadth of the United States of America.

The blueprint for this legislation was provided in my Op-Ed piece that follows:

Racing Needs Independent Drug Agency

by Barry Irwin

Racing is at a crossroads on many fronts these days. New York Racing Association has its back up against the wall. National Thoroughbred Racing Association is rudderless. Thoroughbred Championship Tour is trying to get off the ground. Purse money faces erosion from off-shore betting schemes.

But the single greatest problem facing the game--how to restore integrity to the race itself--is not receiving the attention it so desperately requires.

A group of well-intentioned folk has been trying to create a list of acceptable race-day medications, with agreed-upon threshold levels, they hope will add uniformity to the myriad of combinations currently used throughout the nation's racing jurisdictions. Their goal is to establish uniformity in an effort to give credibility to the game.

Here is some bad news: even if this group achieves its ultimate goal it is not going to do diddly squat to solve the public perception of cleaning up a badly tarnished sport.

There are two very different issues regarding drugs--one regulatory and the other investigative. There are the approved medications the drug consortium is dealing with and there are the performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) few want to address. In order to claim back the many disenchanting bettors that have abandoned racing, we need to address their concerns about PEDs.

A group of racing regulators appointed by politicians has no chance of allaying the fears of bettors or horsemen. Public officials have had their chance and they have failed miserably.

They should not be blamed, because in any field one cares to mention, self-policing has failed. That is why there is such a thing as a police review board.

Horsemen are as much to blame as anybody, especially in Kentucky, where they are so hung up on retaining their horse candy, they have muddled the issue of drugs in the public consciousness. They should be publicly addressing what they all talk about in private, which is that PEDs have irreparably tilted the playing field, instead of using their clout and race-day medication.

Thoroughbred racing has a model it can use to climb its way out of the dark dungeon of public distrust. This model is the United States Anti-Doping Agency.

Prior to the 2004 Olympics, the USADA cleansed the U. S. track and field team of several chronic cheaters.

USADA is an independent agency whose original funding came from the U. S. Olympic Committee.

Prior to the establishment of USADA, the U. S. track and field authority engaged in a systematic sweeping under the rug of drug positives. Sound familiar? It is no coincidence that prior to establishment of USADA that track athletes in our country shared with our racehorses a public perception internationally that both are hopped to the gills.

More than once, in speaking with public regulators, I have heard this comment: "If PEDS are really out there, why has nobody ever come to us and turned in some evidence?"

The climate at the highest official body for U. S. track and field was such, prior to the advent of USADA, that nobody had confidence that turning in incriminating evidence would be taken seriously.

Shortly after establishment of USADA, however, a coach turned in a syringe containing a designer drug that has set the international sporting world on its ear.

I humbly submit to you that if racing had its own independent agency, events such as this would occur.

An independent agency would not be inexpensive. But it could start by analyzing Graded races, testing for which would be easier to fund by a combination of owners, racetracks and state governments. Once the highest-level of racing in the land was shown to be on the square, testing of lesser races could follow.

State-by-state fragmentation is killing our sport on the issue of PEDs. This industry more than anything needs an independent agency with its own cutting-edge laboratory and investigative arm to put an end to the type of cheating that has driven away its biggest bettors and discouraged its players from participating.

Before racing presses forward with the TCT and expanded television coverage, it must first clean house, establish protocol for PEDs with some teeth and recapture the faith of its bettors and players. Racing must offer a better sport.

Unless racing goes the independent agency route, it is wasting everybody's time and money.

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In the piece I referenced the now completed "Mid-Atlantic Uniform Medication Program," which could be in use in several states beginning next year. The Jockey Club, for one, has been full of praise for this program.

While significant because of the creators' enterprising organizational skills and potentially useful because of the drug levels it has helped to establish, the program does not address two of the most significant aspects of the drug problem.

Two situations exist that have persistently dogged our industry when it comes to drugs. First, as pointed out quite awhile ago in my earlier piece, the drugs that are taking the wind out of the sails of horseplayers and horse owners/trainers are the ones that remain undetected by those labs used under the program.

Secondly, there exists no credible policing body skilled or motivated enough to catch racing's miscreants.

If adequately funded, USADA can provide the experience, creativity, talent, skill and smarts to search for the undetectable drugs and those criminals that use and sell them. The FBI (and I am not referring to Fuller Brush Incorporated here!) has the techniques and manpower to assist in the policing department, but they have shown little interest outside of some intrusions into Quarter Horse racing to go after suspected involvement by Mexican drug cartels.

Udall and Whitfield's proposed legislation would make it a federal crime to use illegal drugs to impact the result of a horse race in which wagering is conducted across state lines. Can anybody truly blame local racing investigators for not being overly enthusiastic about catching bad guys when nothing happens after these crooks are caught?

But with a new law in place, USADA could field scientists and cops with modern surveillance techniques that would possess the vigor to root out evil, knowing that some resolution would result from their hard work.

In the interim between when the foregoing appeared and the new legislation was proposed, USADA got the goods on and drove Lance Armstrong out of cycling. If nothing else was ever accomplished, USADA will have at least put cycling's participants back on the right track, both literally and figuratively.

Racing needs a few high-profile participants--be they owners, trainers or vets--to be caught with their hands in the cookie jar in order to create a deterrent significant enough to discourage people from cheating with drugs on their horses.

While nothing will ever be perfect, this new proposed legislation does give racing a chance to right itself. We need an independent national body to oversee racing and ensure the integrity of our game. We need horsemen, owners and vets to support it. For every bad guy there are many, many more good guys. It is high time the good guys stood up and were counted, because the few rotten apples in our national barrel are driving our fans away.

We need a game that we can feel good about and have our families, friends and fans be proud of. We need to declare war on the bad guys and improve our weapons.