



# op/ed

by barry irwin

## LASIX NOT AT THE ROUND TABLE

I, along with some 300 other invited guests, attended The Jockey Club Round Table last weekend in Saratoga. Many of Thoroughbred racing's stakeholders had a seat at the Round Table.

The elephant in the room, although unseen and barely mentioned, was Lasix. And believe me, my depiction of Lasix as a clumsy oversized oaf whose swinging trunk might knock over beverages atop the table at its most threatening, is more accurate than depicting it as a 400-pound gorilla. An ape frightens humans and nobody seemed scared of the big fella at the Round Table.

Much ado was made at the Round Table about the need for adopting uniform drug rules in order to create a level playing field that would enhance integrity of the sport so the engine that powers the entire enterprise—the horseplayer—would have more confidence, which would result in this hardy, but gradually disappearing, individual betting more money more often on the races.

Bolstering the notion that horseplayers took into account the impact and possible abuse of drugs, results of a poll strongly and surprisingly (to tunnel-vision drug advocates) indicated that horseplayers wanted better control over drugs that are administered to racehorses as much as they want reduced takeout from bets.

And you know what? I truly believe that and have been writing and saying so for many years, mostly to loud guffaws and ceiling-level raised eyebrows of horsemen and a minority of the horse-playing community.

The Jockey Club put up a rousing good program. For a guy like me that has been decrying the lack of progress on the drug front, listening to the applause from those in attendance after speeches saying all the right things about medication abuse was music to my ears.

Main focus of this year's Round Table seemed to be rallying the troops to support Alan Foreman's Mid-Atlantic medication policy that promises to finally give the entire nation of racing uniform drug rules. Foreman's concept allows use of Lasix on race day.

And, on a significant (if not fully realized level), I think The Jockey Club hierarchy truly believes that controlling medication can level the playing field to give comfort to horseplayers and racing's participants. I believe that under the helm of Jim Gagliano the leaders have tried to grapple with some the drug issues heretofore unconsidered. These are well intentioned people.

But, if Dinny Phipps and Stuart Janney believe for one second that placing The Jockey Club's substantial clout behind a measure that allows race-day use of any medication—and especially Lasix—they are just kidding themselves.

The Jockey Club has been pushing the Foreman program for quite a while now. So when I read a pre-Round Table piece on bloodhorse.com that said The Jockey Club had an anti-Lasix policy, I was taken aback.

I quickly shot out a handful of e-mails to anti-Lasix proponents that I respect to ask them if they knew TJC had come out against the drug. Only one of these folks had heard of it. None of the others—and they comprise some of the most vociferous anti-Lasix and successful owner-breeders in the world—had ever read or heard TJC mention this.

So if TJC is against Lasix, how it is—one may naturally wonder—can they be for the Foreman plan?

In questioning one high-level racing stakeholder that most certainly knows the answer to this question, I learned that more than a year ago a strategy was developed whereby certain groups decided that Lasix was too controversial and volatile of an issue to deal with at this time. It was decided to separate Lasix from further policy discussions and deal with everything else. Hence the stronger move to get as many racing jurisdictions as possible to adopt the Foreman guidelines.

Somebody should tell these guys that putting all of their energy, funding and clout behind the Foreman measure is a misguided venture that will only lead to outside intervention.

Horseracing is desperately trying to beat the Feds in a race for who controls drug policy. Our industry has a window of opportunity to self-police. If TJC thinks that outside forces are going to accept any policy that allows any drugs (especially Lasix) to be used on race day, they are delusional.

Horseplayers know the ins and outs of Lasix, how it impacts the form and the horses and why outing it from the arsenal of trainers would benefit the game. Horseplayers are not stupid or uninformed.

And neither are the owners or breeders of Thoroughbred racehorses.

Look at what happened just this week in Kentucky, where a proposal was introduced by famed veterinarian Dr. Mary Scollay to the bluegrass state's equine drug council. Kentucky stands alone as the only state in the union with horse racing that is programmed to stop the use of Lasix on race day. Adopting the Foreman measure would eliminate the prospect of this seminal policy from being implemented.

Mr. Foreman is actively touting his model drug rules to the detriment of the anti-Lasix movement, which is completely counterproductive to those who would seek to impress horseplayers that racing's playing field can be made level.

Speakers at The Jockey Club have been decrying the rampant abuse of drugs at the Round Table for nearly a quarter of a century. Since the early 1980s presentations at the Round Table have called for action. So what's different this time?

Dinny Phipps ended his remarks at the Round Table by hinting that if racing could not get its house in order that Federal intervention was not only possible but perhaps necessary.

From an historic perspective, Mr. Phipps is one of the heroes in the anti-Lasix movement. He is to be greatly admired as one of those who resisted the implementation of Lasix as the head of the New York Racing Association, which held out some twenty years longer than California racing.

May I humbly suggest to Mr. Phipps and his racing partner Mr. Janney that they reconsider their current stance on Lasix, because the longer they ignore the consequences, the greater the chances that an outside entity is going to force changes upon this game.

And when horseplayers responded to concerns over drugs in the poll funded by The Jockey Club, the chief drug they had in mind was Lasix. You cannot have it both ways-either lead the sport in ridding it of drugs or move out of the way and let somebody else do it for you.