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by bill finley

SYNTHETIC SURFACES SAVE LIVES, SO WHY ARE YOU SO HAPPY THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY OUT?

I am asking the many of you celebrating the on-going unraveling of the synthetic surface era to pause for a moment and consider what this means for the future well-being and safety of the thousands of race horses that have no say in this matter. The answer: a lot more of them are going to die.

That is indisputable.

Every study done has shown that synthetic surfaces are significantly safer than dirt surfaces and their existence has cut down on fatalities. The Jockey Club compiled stats that included 1,135,272 starters on the dirt and 196,944 starters on synthetic surfaces over a four-year period. On synthetic surfaces, 1.22 horses per 1,000 starters die. On dirt surfaces, 2.08 horses per 1,000 starters die.

Applying the 1.22/2.08 numbers over four years, the lives of 166 horses were saved because they raced on synthetic tracks as opposed to more dangerous dirt tracks. Or you can say that 975 died that wouldn't have had they been racing on synthetic tracks and not dirt. Play around with the numbers any way you want and you'll always come up with the same bottom line; replacing a synthetic track with a dirt track ordinarily means more horses will die. So, is going back to dirt really the right thing to do?

That should have been the focal point of every story written, every comment made after Del Mar made the announcement that it was going back to dirt for 2015.

Yet it was barely, if ever, mentioned. Instead, the consensus was that this was a great step forward as another track has decided to rid itself of the evils that are synthetic surfaces. Inside the racing community, curing cancer might not have been received with quite the same universal good cheer.

There are some who mentioned that with another synthetic track biting the dust the industry should try harder to make dirt tracks safer. They can try all they want. Dirt racetracks will always be more dangerous than synthetic racetracks.

I have never understood the vitriol over synthetic tracks. Yes, they are different. Perhaps they are a little quirky. But so what? I believe they became a convenient scapegoat for every trainer and owner every time their horse didn't perform up to par and for every handicapper every time their pick ran like a bum over a synthetic track. It couldn't have been bad training or bad handicapping, now could it, so it had to be the track.

If you look back at the early 1930s when turf racing was introduced in this country at Hialeah I would imagine you would have heard the same complaints about this new, strange form of racing.

To pick on Del Mar wouldn't be fair. With Santa Anita having gone back to dirt and with Hollywood Park having closed, they were left as the only synthetic track in Southern California. As popular as Del Mar is, with a synthetic track, they would be taking the risk that a good amount of trainers would de-emphasize the meet to focus on the ample dirt opportunities elsewhere. The other issue with Del Mar is that, for whatever reason, their synthetic surface was not as safe as it should have been. Numbers can be skewed at Del Mar because a short meet means a small sample size, but when you see 2.39 breakdowns per 1,000 starters in 2012 over the Del Mar Polytrack you have to consider that the surface is flawed. There's also the matter of whether or not they could get the Breeders' Cup without a dirt racetrack.

You can bet that Keeneland is next. Its stakes schedule, and in particular its signature race, the Blue Grass, has suffered because of the synthetic track. With so many places to run, trainers find it easy to stay away from the Keeneland main track races. Keeneland, where management was among the primary pioneers of the synthetic era, is going to have a hard time holding out.

So this is not an indictment of Del Mar or Keeneland, no matter what it decides to do with its track. It is an indictment of a mentality where the welfare of the horses is not put first. Way too many people are so disapproving of synthetic surfaces, so downright giddy that another track has given up on them. That's not surprising in an industry that never truly embraced the concept, an industry that seems to have come to the conclusion that while synthetic tracks save lives there are other factors that are more important.

Del Mar is going back to dirt and you ought to be at least a little bit upset. It's hard to say you really care about the safety of these animals if you're not.

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