

ask The Owners' Circle

What is this new “Polytrack” we keep hearing about?

By Evan Ferraro

In recent months, Del Mar and Hollywood Park have expressed interest in replacing their current dirt racing surfaces with an artificial surface known as “Polytrack.” Is this something we as owners should be excited about? You bet it is!

More commonly found in Europe, Polytrack has gained a foothold in the United States in recent years. Keeneland Racecourse installed the all-weather surface on its training track in September 2004, then this summer at Turfway Park in northern Kentucky. Turfway’s oft-weather-affected main track was converted to Polytrack in time for its fall and winter meet. Thus far, both the Keeneland and Turfway surfaces have been met with enthusiastic reviews from horsemen, who contend that it is a safer, kinder surface on which to train and run.

When racing returned to Turfway on September 7th, it marked the first North American meet ever to be conducted over a Polytrack surface. Should the new Turfway surface successfully handle the wear and tear of daily racing as expected, Keeneland and Del Mar officials have stated publicly that they would work together to convert Del Mar’s main track surface to Polytrack as soon as possible.

While there are various other artificial racing and training surfaces that have been developed over the years, “Polytrack” – the brand name of the product developed by Martin Collins Enterprises of the United Kingdom – has proven the most resilient, effective, and popular. Collins

installed his first Polytrack surface in 1987 for English trainer Richard Hannon, and popularity of the surface immediately grew. English racecourses at Lingfield Park and Wolverhampton installed Polytrack surfaces and have for years offered very competitive racing on the surface. Great Leighs – the first new racecourse to be built in England in 75 years – will open with a Polytrack surface next year.

In addition, several world-class training venues have also installed Polytrack gallops, including the Jockey Club Estates in Newmarket and Ballydoyle in Ireland. Prominent English trainers John Gosden, John Dunlop, and Mark Johnston all train regularly on Polytrack surfaces.

The Polytrack brand of all-weather surface is comprised of polypropylene fibers, cut at various lengths, mixed with recycled rubber, and natural silica sand, all of which is then coated with wax. The mixture is carefully weighed and blended to create even surfaces that maintain their uniformity over long periods of time. The surface is believed to be devoid of the so-called “track biases” found on dirt tracks that favor a particular running style.

Polytrack is installed in layers, with the surface consisting of 7 to 8 inches of Polytrack material (the cushioning pad), over a layer of porous macadam, on top of a clean stone base and drainage system. This composition provides a safer and more forgiving surface believed to reduce injury and body soreness. Trainers contend that horses travel over Polytrack with ease and that the surface keeps them sounder, thus

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** CORRECTION **

The “Ask The Owners’ Circle” article in the Summer 2005 issue contained the following inaccurate wording:

Not factored into a horse’s program weight, however, are a jockey’s safety helmet, safety vest, whip and horse’s bridle. Combined, these pieces of equipment account for approximately 8-10 pounds that the horse carries in addition to his assigned weight.

In fact, the above-mentioned equipment – also referred to as “safety equipment” – weighs approximately 5 lbs. To determine the actual weight the horse carries in a race, this additional 5 lbs. must be added to the “jockey weight” listed in the program. Hence, an entrant with an assigned weight listed as 122 is actually carrying up to 127 lbs.

Legislative Profile: Fabian Núñez

Growing up in San Diego with eleven brothers and sisters, Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez (D – 46th District) never had much of an opportunity to ride horses. However, after first enjoying the races at Del Mar Racetrack, personally witnessing the majesty of the sport, and recognizing the role it has in American culture, the importance of the industry was not lost on him.

The culture that defines horse racing is one that the Speaker believes defines the State of California. According to Núñez, his vision for California is invigorated “in the same way that the famed Seabiscuit reminded Americans of what they stood for at a time when they needed it the most – the spirit of healthy competition, a steadfast work ethic, and a love for the underdog.”

Speaker Núñez’ life story exemplifies this spirit. The son of immigrants, Núñez learned the value of hard work from his parents as they toiled endlessly to support their 12 children. “My parents had very little schooling, but they were my greatest teachers,” he said. “My mom taught me the values of compassion and caring. My dad taught me the value of hard work. For more than 50 years, they worked night and day to support our family.”

As Speaker of the Assembly, Núñez is charged with the task of preserving the unique culture of California as a whole.



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And from early morning workouts to the thrill of the stretch run, he knows that the horse racing industry is just as “Californian” as movie stars and sunshine. Speaker Nunez recognizes the importance of protecting and strengthening the Thoroughbred industry. His strong commitment is conveyed through various pieces of legislation that aim to keep this vital, profitable industry running strong in California, for many years to come.

His other legislative priorities include protecting and improving public education. He believes ensuring a quality education is not only good for business, it is essential to leveling the playing field and building a state in which every child – no matter their background – can gain the skills necessary to turn dreams into reality. According to Núñez, education is the great equalizer, because education “allows the sons and daughters of gardeners to compete with the sons and daughters of bankers.”

Speaker Núñez, it’s clear, has been hard at work preserving his vision of California, and though he may not have grown up around horses, he looks forward to the day when he can leave the political horse races of Sacramento behind for the real thing.

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lengthening their careers and reducing the need for therapeutic medication. The surface creates very little dust and produces substantially less kickback than dirt tracks. It’s also quiet, and many riders have noted that one cannot hear the pounding of hooves of approaching horses on a Polytrack surface.

Polytrack has also proven to be extremely durable, capable of handling a high volume of use, while maintaining its consistency in the face of severe weather conditions and extreme and sudden temperature changes. Its unique design allows rain water to flow vertically into a drainage system that carries water away from the track, as opposed to traditional surfaces on which water runs off the surface horizontally, collecting near the rails and often “washing out” a track. As a result, Polytrack surfaces are flat, as opposed to dirt surfaces, which are crowned.

The artificial surface is much cheaper to maintain than con-

ventional dirt tracks. Polytrack requires much less water and harrowing than traditional surfaces, and depending on how much use it receives and how well it is maintained, needs only to be rejuvenated every 5 to 7 years.

Supporters of Polytrack contend that the surface will help boost handle, as Polytrack’s ability to reduce injury and soreness should lead to an increase in the number of starts horses make at a meet. On weather affected racing days, Polytrack’s ability to retain its consistency should reduce the number of scratches typical of days when there is an “off” track. In fact, for this year’s Turfway meet, Equibase indicated that it will only use “fast” and “wet fast” to designate the Polytrack surface condition. Should Polytrack one day become commonplace in American racing, the days of “mudders” and “off-track pedigrees” might become a thing of the past.