

A “Cushier” Future for California racing

Polytrack Premiers at Del Mar

By Mary Forney

With the opening of its 2007 meet, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club will debut a new Polytrack racing surface. The engineered track surface, manufactured by Martin Collins Surfaces & Footings LLC, makes Del Mar the fifth horseracing facility in the nation to install an advanced racing surface. Currently in use at Arlington Park in Illinois and Keeneland and Turfway in Kentucky, Polytrack has demonstrated an ability to deliver a safer and more consistent surface on which horses and riders can compete with seemingly less risk.

Structure & Composition

Polytrack – which has been customized for Del Mar – encompasses an entire racetrack system, including a specially designed surface layer that works in tandem with a unique vertical drainage configuration. The combination creates a consistent, reliable racetrack that requires less maintenance than its former conventional dirt track.

The racing surface – the top 7 inches – is a mixture of sand, fibers, recycled rubber, and a polymer wax coating. However, the sand is not just any sand, but specialized sand mined in Illinois for its high silica content. This sand accounts for roughly 85 percent of the surface mixture. The balance consists of rubber and fiber, including both spandex and carpet fibers.

Unlike the Keeneland and Arlington tracks, Del Mar’s mixture does not include jelly cable, a plastic insulation used on copper wiring that has a high petroleum jelly content believed to help bind the surface in cold weather.

“In locations where there are freezing temperatures, jelly cable helps to moderate the performance of the track,” explained Craig Fravel, Del Mar’s Executive Vice President. “But there are



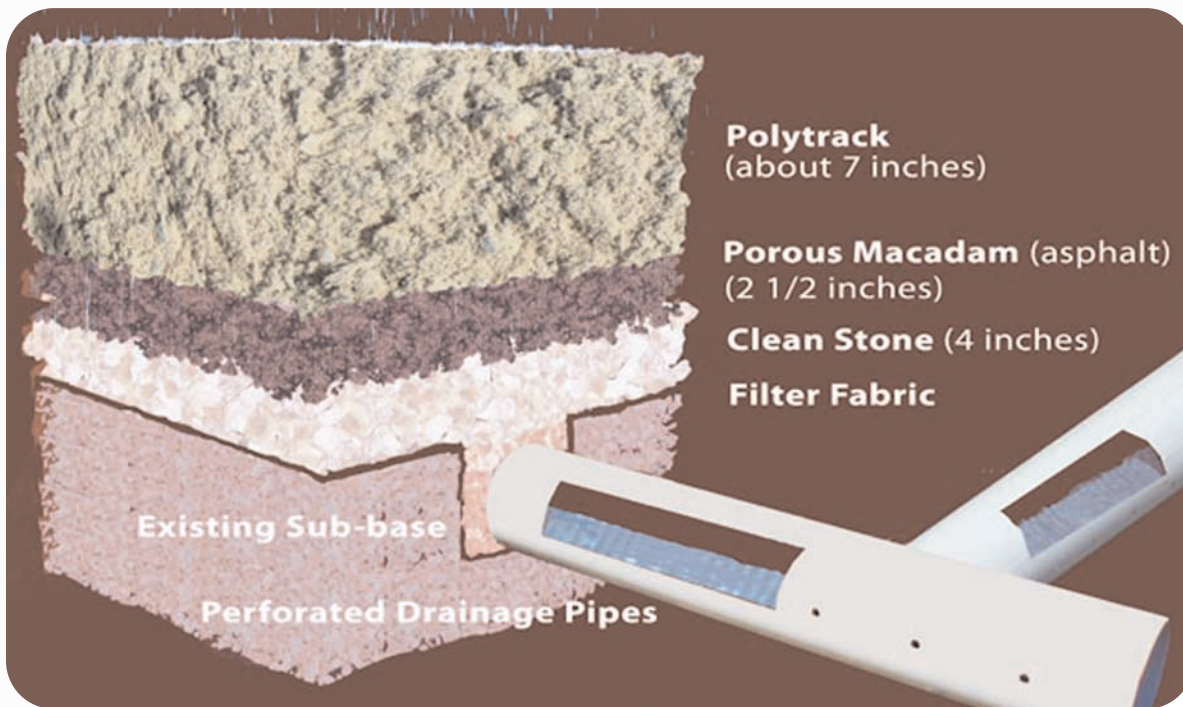
water quality issues related to jelly cable. For us, there was not as high a comfort factor from an environmental standpoint.”

According to Fravel, if Del Mar had used jelly cable in its mix, it might have meant an additional year pursuing the environmental approval for its use. “There just weren’t enough tracks in existence, when we were going through the environmental process, to go to them and test their runoff, and be able to say it wasn’t really an issue,” he said.

Below the surface there are sub-layers of porous macadam (asphalt), crushed stone, and a filter fabric laid over the dirt surface and pipe drainage system for soil stabilization and to provide another filtering component. The drainage system itself consists of a parallel and perpendicular network of specially designed perforated pipes, sometimes referred to as a “French drain” system.

Polytrack Facts

- Polytrack’s softer cushion absorbs much of the concussion generated by a horse’s weight and force when it strikes the surface, thereby reducing the risk of injury to its legs and back.
- Polytrack is also recognized as providing more secure footing, while maintaining the “give” necessary for a kinder surface.



*Del Mar's
Polytrack
Composition*

- *The surface's composition reduces kickback and maintains uniformity.*
- *The system requires less watering and grooming than does a dirt track.*
- *Because of the unique drainage system, rain drains vertically through the surface, then laterally away from the track, below the surface. With conventional dirt tracks, the water drains horizontally with the slope of the surface, which can and has caused "washouts" and erosion, compromising track safety and creating biases.*
- *Del Mar will now recognize two sets of main "track record times" – one for dirt and one for Polytrack.*
- *It is anticipated that Polytrack will only need refreshing every five to seven years.*

According to Fravel, when the track was initially installed, the surface materials were intentionally mixed "light on the wax content," as it is much more manageable and practical to add wax than it is to take it out. "We then did a series of tests, adding wax gradually to produce just the right compaction and shear strength," said Fravel. "Wax content is what determines the strength in shear."

As with any new project, considerations arise as the process proceeds, some based on fact, others on innuendo and rumor. Of concern to some horsemen was the surface's potential to absorb heat after prolonged exposure to summer sunlight. Del Mar is aware of the concern, and has monitored the track surface's temperature. "The highest we've seen is about 120

degrees," reported Fravel. Not exactly the bare-feet-scorching, run-across-quickly beach sand common in August just a few yards west of the far turn. As a matter of fact, Fravel is regularly performing his own non-scientific barefoot tests on the Polytrack!

As expected, there are adjustments to be made as each new engineered track is installed. But they will be adjustments that horsemen will be informed of and will be more than willing to accept. The bottom line is that Polytrack will make the Del Mar racing surface a much safer place for horses and riders this summer.

Special recognition and thanks should be given to the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club and to Craig Fravel who, together with Hollywood Park's Martin Panza and TOC, were instrumental in bringing engineered surfaces to California racing.

With the start of the 2007 Del Mar Meet, California horses, coming from Hollywood Park's Cushion Track, will make their first transition from one engineered racing surface to another. Horsemen too will have a learning curve trying to identify if the change in surface will affect performance, and to what degree. This will be a welcomed learning

experience, as later this fall Southern California horsemen will once again have the chance to enjoy another new engineered racing surface – the new Cushion Track at Santa Anita. Thoroughbred owners everywhere are excited by MEC's decision to commit to the installation of this new surface by the fall Oak Tree meet. Happily, we are indeed first-hand witnesses to a new era in California racing.

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