

Improving Southern California's Racetrack Surfaces

by Richard Mandella

For years Southern California's racing surfaces have had the reputation of being hard and fast. Many horsemen believe that their surfaces cause too many injuries to their racehorses. This issue came to a head during Del Mar's 1996 summer meet, when racing lost too many horses to training injuries.

Prominent owner Martin Wygod publicly expressed his frustration over losing two of his best mares to injuries he attributed to the condition of the racing surface. His comments served to focus attention on the underlying problem of racetrack surfaces.



Photo by Benolt and Associates

The Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association (HBPA) is primarily responsible for issues affecting the backstretch of racetracks. Since the Del Mar meet, members of the HBPA's Track Committee, composed of trainers Jude Feld, Clifford Sise, Jack Van Berg, Danny Velasquez, myself, and jockey Lafit Pincay, Jr. have been discussing the problem of the track surface and have been looking for possible solutions. We are preparing to present our efforts to the members of Del Mar and Santa Anita's track management and work cooperatively towards fixing the problem. TOC, through its President John Van de Kamp, is joining us in this effort.

What are the Problems with Track Surfaces?

As a conditioner of 32 horses at Del Mar this summer, and as Chairman of the Track Committee, I believe that the

problem with the surface included not only the content of the track's material, but also the number of horses training over the surface on a daily basis. Approximately 2500 horses were stabled at Del Mar. Such a large number of horses training over a track on a daily basis creates too much wear and tear on a surface, making it difficult to keep the surface in good shape.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, major complaints were heard regarding the actual composition of the track's surface. Of all the problems a racetrack may have, such as being too hard, soft, or cuppy*, horsemen agree that the problem of most significance is the compacting of dirt clods in horse's hooves, commonly referred to as "balling up." This condition occurs when the composition of the track's surface material includes excessive amounts of silt, clay, and fir bark. Besides being extremely uncomfort-

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able to horses, these clods of dirt lodging in the hoof affect the angle at which a horse's hoof hits the ground, thus causing or contributing to a myriad of injuries.

The Quest for a Better Surface

Joe Harper, President of Del Mar, has requested that the HBPA work with horsemen to find a feasible solution to the track's surface problem. Once we find a solution agreeable to horsemen, Harper has indicated that Del Mar will work with us to implement the Committee's recommendations.

As a result, members of the HBPA's Track Committee have been meeting since the Del Mar meet to discuss alternatives to Del Mar's surface. Our committee found that the Los Alamitos Racecourse, a nearby Quarter Horse track, was having a positive experience with materials they incorporated into the 4-1/2 furlong chute of their track nearly two years ago. We feel it worthwhile to further investigate and experiment with this surface, as such efforts could benefit our Thoroughbred tracks.

Dennis Moore, Los Alamitos' track superintendent, provided us with more information and insight when we traveled to Los Alamitos to examine their racing surface first-hand. He showed us how Los Alamitos combined a material called Sports Grids with an organic stabilizer and was able to lower their track's silt and clay content and incorporate more sand into the track. Sports Grids are polypropylene fibers fibulated to have an accordion-like effect which bears the weight of running horses. The organic stabilizer they use is a crushed powder that is a by-product of Metamucil. The combination of Sports Grids and the stabilizer act as a cohesive agent for the track's different particulate matter, allowing the track to incorporate more sand into the track without becoming cuppy. Mr. Moore also informed us

that this surface fared quite well in rainy conditions, did not ball up, and yet held moisture well, an important factor in preventing a cuppy track.

Although members of the Track Committee were excited after seeing this surface, we wanted and needed the opinions of other trainers. Numerous trainers have since traveled



Photo by Benoit and Associates

to Los Alamitos to view the surface, including Ed Gregson, Ben Cecil, Ron Ellis, Wally Dollase, Lewis Cenicola, Neil Drysdale, Bobby Frankel, Randy Bradshaw, Ron McAnally, and Tim Yakteen, Charlie Whittingham's assistant. The consensus has been amazingly positive, with many reporting that the portion of Los Alamitos' surface containing the new materials to be "the best racing surface they had seen."

We are continuing to encourage other trainers, and owners, to visit Los Alamitos, as we welcome more feedback.

Track Management and Horsemen Working Together to Improve the Racing Surface

The HBPA, working with the racetracks, would like to experiment with

incorporating a surface similar to Los Alamitos' into Hollywood Park and Santa Anita's training tracks this winter. Once we gain more confidence with the material and conclude that it is a significant improvement, we will recommend that Del Mar replace its main surface with the materials used in Los Alamitos' surface in time for their 1997 summer meet.

However, if these materials are not the solution to our surface problems, we will continue to explore other alternatives. We are committed to finding a workable solution for Del Mar, and look forward to finding a surface that will allow Del Mar to have the best racing surface possible.

Changing racing surfaces is costly, as is well-known. However, investing in a racing surface that maintains a horse's well-being and allows the public more confidence in our sport should pay for itself many times over. Keeping this in mind, we look forward to working with track management in a unified effort to improve the condition of our racetracks.

**A cuppy track is one that will break out from underneath a horse, making it difficult for a horse to take a hold of the surface and contributing to bowed tendons and other soft tissue injuries. 🐾*



Richard Mandella is one of Southern California's top conditioners. He serves as Chairman of the HBPA's Track Committee and has spent much time on the issue of track safety.

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