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California News Stories -- 2009

Safety and Integrity of Utmost Importance in California

By Tracy Gantz

Bo Derek, Luis Jauregui, and Sonia Pishehvar would seem to have little in common. Derek is the famous movie star and poster girl of the movie "10." Jauregui got some face time in "Seabiscuit" as one of the jockeys riding against the popular horse, but he makes his living at the racetrack. Pishehvar can claim even less of a Hollywood connection as the program administrator for the California Horseman's Safety Alliance (CHSA).

Where Derek, Jauregui, and Pishehvar meet, however, is as some of the more visible people working to see that everyone in the California racing industry—be they human or equine—remains safe. California is one of the most proactive racing jurisdictions in the country in its efforts to reduce racetrack injuries and afford participants the most protection possible, whether in safety equipment or in safe practices.

Derek, as a California Horse Racing Board commissioner, chairs the CHRB safety committee that is overseeing regulatory requirements for such items as better helmets, safety vests, and whips for jockeys, exercise riders, and others on the racetrack. CHRB chairman John Harris created the committee to review recommended standards and proposals on improved equipment.

Derek, who raises and rides Andalusian and Lusitano horses, has made safety a priority in her CHRB duties.

"The new equipment is so superior (at keeping riders safe)," Derek said. "At the committee meeting during Del Mar, we had experts in who demonstrated what happens to heads when people fall. It really hit home with me. I used to not wear a helmet, but I wear one now."

Jauregui works for the CHRB as a safety steward, checking all aspects of a racetrack to see that safety regulations are being met or exceeded. As a former jockey, he has the experience to know when something might pose a hazard to horse or rider.

"I check the dirt and turf courses, look at the starting gate, inspect the horse ambulances—anything that could affect safety," said Jauregui.

Jauregui and Derek spoke to jockeys as early as the summer of 2008 regarding the kinder whips. Derek suggested to Garrett Gomez and other riders that they take the initiative in pushing for the whips. Jockeys began using them this past summer at Del Mar.

"The riders care so much about the horses," Derek said. "The riders here are so good, and most of them don't abuse the whip. Sometimes it's merely the rhythm that tells the horse, 'Now it's time to go faster.' "

Pishehvar spends much of her time educating trainers and their help about how to reduce accidents, whether on the racetrack or around the barn. The CHSA's safety program, now in its fifth year, has taught countless employees of its 440 member-trainers safe work practices through meetings, DVDs, and other CHSA programs.

"We are trying to reduce human-error accidents," Pishehvar said. "We are teaching employees about the mindsets that lead to accidents—if you're rushing or not focused, for example—and to be on the lookout for their co-workers. When an accident does happen, we discuss what could have been done differently and are compiling information to find out what accidents are occurring and how to minimize or eliminate them."

Such efforts are among the reasons that California's standards have in many cases been the model for the National Thoroughbred Racing Association Safety & Integrity Alliance's racetrack accreditation program. Hollywood Park was one of the first racetracks in the nation to receive NTRA accreditation, followed by Del Mar, Santa Anita and the Oak Tree Racing Association.

When California tracks go through the detailed accreditation process, they are a slam dunk in several categories.

"The state of California and the California Horse Racing Board lead the nation in many areas concerning the safety and integrity of horse racing," said Alex Waldrop, the president and chief executive officer of the NTRA. Waldrop particularly singled out pre-race inspections, the equine post-mortem program, drug testing, safety research, and horse aftercare.

California set what many consider the "gold standard" for an equine post-mortem program all the way back in 1990. In the ensuing two decades, the knowledge gleaned from investigating every equine fatality on the racetrack has led to advances in veterinary medicine and practices that save horses' lives and prevent injuries.

The Dolly Green Nuclear Imaging clinic at Santa Anita was a direct result of information gleaned from the California post-mortem program. More than 8,000 horses have undergone nuclear examinations, which are especially effective at identifying otherwise undetectable bone injuries.

Waldrop called the program "an industry-wide 'best practice' because it exceeds the Alliance Code of Standards, which allows for a more limited 'field' necropsy under certain circumstances."

All post-mortems in California are preformed by pathologists at one of the California Animal Health and Food Safety laboratories operated by the

University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

California is now expanding on its post-mortem program through more in-depth study of injuries and more refined epidemiological analysis. The Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation-funded research by Dr. Jeff Blea and Dr. Wayne McIlwraith is evaluating the lesser equine injuries that occur during racing and morning training. McIlwraith is also collaborating with Dr. Mick Peterson in studying racetrack surfaces nationwide, a program that had its beginnings in California. The CHRB and the Dolly Green Research Foundation are funding research comparing the biomechanical differences between horses at racing speeds on dirt and synthetic surfaces through Dr. Sue Stover and the J. D. Wheat Veterinary Orthopedic Research Laboratory at U.C. Davis.

"Safety research out of California is the best," said Mike Ziegler, executive director of the NTRA Safety & Integrity Alliance. Zieler complimented California racetrack managements for their attention to safety through funding of research projects with the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium and the Grayson Foundation. He also cited California's takeout percentage that has long gone to UC-Davis for research into equine health.

The meticulous pre-race inspection program mandated at California racetracks also puts the state head and shoulders above most racing jurisdictions. In the mornings, an official racetrack veterinarian inspects all horses that are scheduled to race that afternoon, as well as again as the horses enter the paddock before the race and through their pre-race warm-ups.

Dr. Jill Bailey is one of the veterinarians who conduct such inspections. She feels that the morning inspections are particularly valuable.

"You can see and feel things in the morning that you cannot see on the track," she said. "The more you look and the more closely you look, the more easily you can find those things when they're minor."

That care for the horse continues after the horse finishes its racing career. Waldrop singled out the new California Retirement Management Account (CARMA), funded by Thoroughbred owners and others in the state's racing industry. CARMA grants funds to organizations that care for retired racehorses and find them new careers.

"California is setting an example for the rest of the country," said Waldrop, "thanks in large part to the efforts of the Thoroughbred Owners of California, in the area of aftercare of retired racehorses. CARMA, with its creative approach to fund-raising and its active support of California retraining and retirement facilities, is an example of what can be achieved when owners, trainers, tracks, and other industry participants work together to solve the problem."

Derek, Jauregui, and Pishehvar are looking out for horses and riders. The CHSA has been in the forefront of research into better safety vests and helmets as well as whips and safety reins. The new whips are kinder to horses, and the CHRB waived a rule during the summer to allow for the use of the whips. The CHRB is in the process of adopting a new rule that would require the improved whips, safety vests, and helmets.

"The new whips are lighter, and the core doesn't go all the way to the end," Derek said. "They are also padded, and all of the edges are rolled. Sometimes with the older whips, the feathers could get very hard and sharp."

Pishehvar said that the CHSA is continuing to help the industry develop standards for safety reins. Once those standards are in place, the CHRB safety committee will likely recommend adoption of those as well.

The CHSA contracted with Terry Smith PhD of Dynamic Research Inc. to develop better vests, and Smith is aiding in the work on safety reins. The CHSA has also asked jockeys for input.

"This is the first time that jockeys have been involved," said Pishehvar.

Jockeys explained that vests not only need to protect their bodies, they must have enough flexibility so as not to impede riders' ability to do their job. That flexibility is also critical so that jockeys and exercise riders can tuck and roll if they are involved in a spill.

The new helmets and vests are not cheap, making their purchase a hardship for some jockeys and exercise riders. Derek is working with Pishehvar as well as Darrell Haire of The Jockeys' Guild on ways to defray those costs. Derek said that The Jockeys' Guild plans to organize some events to raise money for the equipment, while the CHSA has a used equipment exchange in place.

"That ties into our online safety training," Pishehvar explained. "We're fine-tuning that now. This training will be offered to exercise riders, jockeys, and grooms."

Exercise riders and jockeys who successfully complete the training and receive safety certification will qualify for a subsidy that covers an upgraded vest and helmet, as long as they turn in their old vest and helmet. Pishehvar explained that they want the old, less-safe equipment out of circulation. Grooms will receive a subsidy for slip-resistant work boots. All of this will be on first-come, first-served basis while funds last.

California's safety considerations extend beyond the participants. The CHSA has conducted educational meetings for racetrack employees who do not regularly work with horses.

"We trained landscaping and maintenance personnel so that they would be aware that what they're doing could contribute to an accident on the racetrack," said Pishehvar. "They might be driving too fast, which could scare a horse, for example. These meetings have brought about a consciousness of what to do around horses."

Jauregui recently helped organize a meeting about emergency protocols. If an accident does occur, these protocols outline who to call and what to do. Veterinarians, outriders, stewards, and other racetrack personnel attended the meeting.

"California is clearly committed to a high degree of transparency in the conduct of all its activities related to safety and integrity," said Waldrop. "While that sometimes means that California holds its participants to a higher standard than elsewhere, on the whole, such transparency is a good thing for California, its human and equine athletes, and horseplayers nationwide."

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