



Update On The Science of Track Surface Management

Through the Welfare and Safety of the Racehorses Summits, launched in 2006 by The Jockey Club and Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, Dr. Mick Peterson of the University of Maine has become well known to race track superintendents.

This arm of the Thoroughbred industry has proven eager to accept outside help from Dr. Peterson, and with the help of The Jockey Club he established the Racing Surface Testing Laboratory. Many tracks have commissioned him to evaluate their racing surfaces. During the recent Annual Arizona Global Symposium on Racing & Gaming at the University of Arizona, Dr Peterson led a presentation which illustrated the progress that has been made and looked ahead to exciting new developments.

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Managing a racetrack may one day be handled the same way an engineer would maintain any precision instrument. At least that's the goal of Mick Peterson, executive director of the Racing Surface Testing Laboratory.

Speaking at Dec. 11 panel discussion on track safety held during the 40th Annual Arizona Global Symposium on Racing & Gaming, Peterson said track superintendents are faced with "building a new product every day" that has to meet the highest safety standards for horses and riders.

What will go a long way toward helping them achieve their safety standard consistently, according to Peterson, is the collection of detailed information on track conditions, action taken on maintenance, and weather. Then marry this information with data from the industry's Equine Injury Database to identify best practices under any weather conditions, during any season.

"The goal is to understand why we have to do something at Lone Star Park that we don't have to do at Churchill Downs, and should Louisiana Downs look more like Lone Star or Churchill?" he said. "This is the next stage."

More and more racetracks are setting up systems to monitor and record track conditions. They exist at Aqueduct Racetrack, tracks in Southern California, Churchill Downs Inc.'s family of racetracks, and Keeneland. Equally important to collecting this data, Peterson said, is to capture the experience of seasoned superintendents like Roy Smith with Parx Racing, George McDermott recently retired superintendent at Lone Star Park, and semi-retired Churchill Downs superintendent Butch Lehr. All three men were part of the symposium panel discussion and have 100 years of combined experience in track maintenance.

"What we are seeing that if you go back three generations (of superintendents)—to the people who trained these guys—the goal has always been to get the horses back safe and keep the fields large and adapt to the weather they had," Peterson said. "Our goal now is to capture that information because you might notice that this group isn't particularly young...when we talk about risks to the industry, one of the biggest risks is losing their expertise" All three superintendents said they recognized the need to pass along what they've learned through Peterson and through an annual Track Superintendents' Field Day, which will be held for its 13th year in 2014.

"There is a right time and wrong time to use equipment," said McDermott. "There is a right time and a wrong time to do anything to a racing surface because if you don't do it the right way and at the proper time, you can literally lose a racing day. No one wants to see a whole building full of people told they have to go home for the day, taking all that money in their pockets with them."

Lehr said there isn't "a book out there yet" that can explain how to build and maintain a racetrack.

"I've said it before, you won't be able to fix a lot of problems until you can put a roof over the whole thing," he said.

Peterson said he believes with consistent and thorough data collection, the industry can develop maintenance documentation like an airplane check-list used by pilots or like those used by surgical nurses to be sure all sponges and clamps are accounted for.

"We don't do that now," he said. "It is where we need to go."