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by bill finley

SO WHY DID WE DISMISS THE SYNTHETIC SOLUTION?

Now the *New York Times* is pummeling horse racing. We've seen the first part of a four-part series and the "paper of record" has all but come out and said that racing is a notch below cock fighting. PETA, as vitriolic as ever, has had its say, choosing the HBO series "Luck," and by extension, the sport, as its punching bag. Even New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has chimed in, telling NYRA that horses better stop dying at Aqueduct, or else.

When it comes to negative publicity and the sport's image, there has never been anything quite like this dark month of March 2012. This is serious stuff and please don't think for a second that this is some small storm that will be weathered. The damage done by the *Times*, "Luck" and the Aqueduct breakdowns is severe and irreversible.

The industry keeps telling its many critics and enemies that as long as mankind races horses, horses will die. Unfortunately, that's true. But do they have to die at the alarming rate of 1.88 horses per 1,000 starts? That's the key. That number has to be sliced in half, at least in half.

In the wake of the Eight Belles death and so much outside scrutiny, including pressure from Washington, D.C., the industry promised it would start fixing the problem, that it would make horse racing safer. As the *New York Times* pointed out in a series that began on the front page of its Sunday newspaper, not only did the sport fail to deliver on its promise, things have only gotten worse.

So here we are, once again scrambling for answers and solutions, ways to get everyone off our backs. The funny thing is, we had the answer. And we threw it away.

Those who manufactured synthetic surfaces and other proponents of these newfangled tracks assured the sport that they were safer, that they would save the lives of horses and cut down on injuries to the riders. They were right.

According to recently released data from The Jockey Club, the rate of fatalities on dirt surfaces is nearly twice as high as they are on synthetic surfaces. In 2011, horses died at a rate of 2.07 per 1,000 starters on dirt surfaces as opposed to 1.09 per 1,000 on synthetic surfaces.

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The numbers couldn't be more obvious or more convincing, yet the anti-synthetic crowd, which is big and loud, keeps going out of its way to twist them in every which direction until they are unrecognizable. Their go-to argument is that the numbers are meaningless because so many high-class racetracks like Keeneland, Del Mar and Hollywood have synthetic surfaces and classier horses are less likely to break down than the ones who run over cheap dirt tracks like Finger Lakes and Suffolk Downs.

Then how do you explain what has happened at Santa Anita? In 2009 and 2010 there were six fatalities over the synthetic surface at Santa Anita, for a rate of 0.76 deaths per 1,000 starters. Starting on Dec. 26, 2010, when Santa Anita returned to dirt and running through all of 2011, there were 2.96 deaths per 1,000 starters over the new Santa Anita surface. That's nearly four times higher than the rate over the synthetic track. This is as apples-to-apples as you get, and the only possible explanation for the dramatic increase in deaths is that the Santa Anita dirt track is much more dangerous than the Santa Anita synthetic track was.

In a story that appeared in Saturday's *Los Angeles Times* (yes, they're smacking racing around, too), it was reported that horses were twice as likely to die over Santa Anita's dirt track than they were over the state's three synthetic surfaces--Del Mar, Hollywood and Golden Gate.

Despite the obvious--that synthetic tracks are safer than dirt tracks--too many in the sport couldn't turn their backs on these new surfaces fast enough. Somehow, it became conventional wisdom that the synthetic track experiment was a colossal failure. Clearly, Frank Stronach believed that. If not, he never would have gone back to dirt at Santa Anita.

Most synthetic critics are either gamblers or trainers, two groups that like to bitch and moan.

The gamblers said they couldn't figure the synthetic tracks out and didn't want to bet on them. How much do you want to bet that the exact same things were being said back in the early 30s when Hialeah became the first U.S. track to install a grass course? Yet, bettors didn't seem to mind synthetic tracks when they stepped up to the windows. Keeneland had a record handle increase when it went to Polytrack. To this day, there remains no credible evidence that handle has fallen anywhere due to synthetic tracks.

As for trainers, synthetic tracks became a convenient excuse. They couldn't win because their horses didn't like these new tracks. That their horses were slow and that their training skills were suspect did not, of course, have anything to do with their losing.

This sport has an obligation to do everything in its power to protect the animal. When it doesn't, this is what happens, a powerful voice like the *New York Times* will call it out and bloody it in the process.

Finley cont.

Sure, there are other problems and other reasons why horses breakdown. You can start with a sport that is way too lenient when it comes to drugs and racing commissions and commissioners who are afraid to do the right thing. This was a prevalent topic in the *Times'* series, which focused a lot of attention on an appalling lack of control and oversight in New Mexico.

But dirt tracks are undoubtedly a huge part of the problem and, for the good of the horses, they needed to be replaced by a safer alternative. That's what Nick Nicholson and a handful of others were saying six, seven years ago when they argued passionately that nothing was more important than protecting the animal. Instead, the majority rebelled against Nicholson and synthetic tracks.

And look where it got us. On the front page of the Sunday *New York Times*.