

March 2019 – New Rules at Santa Anita

After 22 thoroughbreds had died at Santa Anita from the start of the meet in late December until mid-March, the track was shut down for weeks. Experts were brought in to assess the surface. More experts were brought in to second-guess the first group of experts. The conclusion: Probably the breakdowns didn't have much to do with the condition of the racing surface.

So what were the causes? Randomness and bad luck, surely. But why do horses break down at all? You could say that powerful thoroughbreds going full bore on spindly legs is a tragedy waiting to happen, and maybe you're not wrong. Still, relatively few horses break down either in a race or in training.

You could make a case that the overuse of drugs has played a part. Nobody likes drugs, except maybe for those 30% trainers and their vets who seem to know just how many drops of some medication will either improve or maintain the performance level of their horses. The optics aren't good. If you have to keep pumping large critters with drugs to run, even though they love running freely in the field, something doesn't seem right. And it isn't.

So Santa Anita's track owners announced strict new rules regarding the use of race-day medications. Among the changes for both the home track and its sister Golden Gate: a ban on Lasix (used by nearly every horse at both tracks), and increasing the ban on legal therapeutic anti-inflammatory drugs, joint injections, shockwave therapy, and anabolic steroids. Also included were demands that all veterinary records be transparent, and an expansion of out-of-competition testing.

The changes, long sought by many horse lovers and racing fans, represent a revolutionary step forward in the constant battle between the syringe-meisters and the medication police. Maybe some of these horses shouldn't be running, and that's the whole point.

Internationally, much of this has never been a problem. In Germany, for instance, any horse who has ever raced with Lasix is not allowed to enter the breeding shed. But in the United States, with its dozens of racing commissions—each with its own set of rules—gaining a medication edge has long been the province of certain trainers. And

with the typical punishment for most violators being only a short suspension, some see stepping over the line on drugs as just the cost of doing business.

No one seems to be sure why so many horses have broken down at Santa Anita. Sure, there have been especially heavy rains of late, a rarity in southern California. But otherwise, things haven't changed much. For years, horses have depended on drugs, and horses have been entered when they should have been rested, or they're worked too hard in the mornings, or they've raced on sealed tracks, or, or, or. Maybe the large number of recent deaths has simple been a random outlier, just as many "cancer clusters" turn out to be a statistical anomaly.

Nonetheless, many horses who shouldn't be racing do, and have for years, much like some NFL players couldn't take the field on Sunday without their regular shot of Toradol. Decades ago, the average number of starts per thoroughbred per year was 11. Now it's down to 6—even as the horse population is half what it once was. So even though there's pressure to enter horses, many of them still can't manage to race that often. Many observers blame the heavy use of drugs, which leads drugged-up champions to mate with drugged-up mares to produce... what?

Santa Anita has also hired more officials to inspect horses, particularly before they're allowed on the track for timed workouts. And that can't hurt.

Unfortunately, there is no uniform, nationwide strategy to deal with drugs. In some places, Drug A is allowed but Drug B isn't, which is reversed in a neighboring state. Or 25ccs are OK in one place, but 50ccs are permitted in another.

But even with total bans on all drugs all the time, some horses will snap a leg, just as NBA players tear an ACL even with nobody guarding them. It's the nature of sports, and a cruel nature. But humans have a choice to participate. Horses don't.

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