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CHRB NEWS RELEASE

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BOARD MANDATES SYNTHETIC SURFACES

LOS ALAMITOS, CA – The California Horse Racing Board took a strong stand in support of track safety and ensuring the health of horses and riders Thursday by giving final approval to a regulatory amendment requiring the installation of synthetic surfaces at the major thoroughbred racetracks in California by the end of next year.

The rule states that effective January 1, 2008, “No racing association that operates four weeks of continuous Thoroughbred racing in a calendar year shall be licensed to conduct a horse racing meeting at a facility that has not installed a polymer synthetic type racing surface.”

Chairman Richard B. Shapiro said it is incumbent on the Board to deal with the unacceptable problem of racehorse deaths and injuries, and the mandate for synthetic surfaces is part of the solution.

“While it is not just racing surfaces causing the problem, it certainly is a contributing factor,” said Shapiro. “I think it is clear, given Turfway Park’s experience, that California needs to move forward and continue our progress.”

Shapiro later added, “I am elated that our Board has demonstrated the wisdom, foresight, and willingness to move this forward. I am grateful to all of the California industry participants who have supported this initiative. As we move forward with this process, we will continue to study all aspects related to installing these surfaces.”

The Board action followed several months of discussions, study, and research into the merits of synthetic surfaces, including presentations to the industry by representatives of four different polymer-based surfaces: Polytrack, Tapeta, Cushion Surface, and StaLok. All four surfaces include a mixture of fibers and sand coated with wax, which is installed over a vertical drainage system.

The recurring theme in those four presentations to horsemen, racing executives, jockeys, and representatives of the CHRB was that polymer-based surfaces are safer for horses than traditional dirt surfaces and result in fewer injuries.

In the first of those presentations in March, Kentucky racing executives noted that Polytrack has been in use at Turfway Park since August for training and since January for racing, resulting in a significant drop in racehorse fatalities and injuries. Turfway officials reported there had been three catastrophic injuries to horses since August, compared with 20 for the same period the previous year, before Polytrack replaced the traditional dirt surface at Turfway.

After the Turfway meet closed April 6, the association provided updated safety figures in a news release: “During the 2005 Winter/Spring Meet, 14 horses suffered catastrophic breakdowns; i.e., on-track injuries that resulted in the death of the horse by euthanasia. During the same meet in 2006, that number was zero. Since the track opened for racing on September 7, 2005, through the close of the 2006 Winter/Spring Meet, three horses have suffered catastrophic breakdowns on-track. During the same period in 2004-2005, 24 horses suffered such breakdowns.”

Representatives of Cushion Surface made a separate presentation last month to the California horse-racing industry, during which James Givens, a trainer and equine veterinarian, spoke at length in a recorded interview about the safety advantages of Cushion Surface. Givens said the surface is resilient, and horses “skip along easily.” He said their feet stay planted, resulting in fewer bone chips, spurs, and suspensory injuries.

And in a third presentation last month, Trainer Michael Dickinson, who installed Tapeta track at his Maryland training center nearly eight years ago, cited findings by Dr. George Pratt of MIT and Dr. Michael Petersen indicating that Tapeta offers more cushion (as measured by compression) than traditional dirt tracks while providing firmer footing (as measured by sheer strength), all of which greatly reduces injuries to horses.

The racing commissioners had approved the regulatory amendment for public notice in February, and the Board received comments both in favor and opposed to the proposal.

When Shapiro opened the public hearing on the proposed amendment Thursday, Commissioner Jerry Moss expressed concern that the various racing associations might each opt for a different polymer surface (e.g. Polytrack at one, Cushion Surface at another, etc.), and he suggested there should be more study to determine the best way to proceed.

Ed Halpern, executive director of the California Thoroughbred Trainers (CTT), said his directors voted unanimously in favor of the amendment, believing that synthetic surfaces are “safer for horses and their riders.”

Howard Zucker, a trainer who serves on the CTT’s track safety committee, said, “Here’s a chance for California to be in the forefront of making safe racing. Let’s start with safe, then we can move on from there.”

Craig Fravel, executive vice president of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club (DMTC), referred to the Preakness Stakes and the injury to Barbaro when he said, “I don’t want to pretend that the injury would not have happened if there had been Polytrack (at Pimlico), but racing can no longer get along with saying that’s all part of horse racing. I think our actions in California will show the way for a lot of people around the country.”

Drew Couto, president of the Thoroughbred Owners of California (TOC), said his directors also support the mandate because “it is very important to this industry that we do something now.”

Darrell Haire, national manager of the Jockeys’ Guild, said the jockeys support the amendment, including those who have ridden over the Polytrack surface at Turfway.

Ron Charles, president of Santa Anita Park and Golden Gate Fields, said it is his understanding “there is very little difference” to the four surfaces being discussed and there should be consistency even if different racing associations choose different products.

After hearing the testimony, Shapiro remarked, “The number of horses fatally injured is astounding. It would be imprudent for us to not move in the right direction.”

Commissioner John Harris said, “No one can be 100-percent certain that this is the way to go, but I think we can always make minor modifications along the way. We should move forward.”

In the 4-0 vote, Moss abstained while Commissioners William Bianco and John Andreini voted with Shapiro and Harris in favor of the mandate.

In other business, the Board approved applications for race meetings by the DMTC at Del Mar (July 19 through September 6), the Sonoma County Fair at Santa Rosa (July 26 through August 7), and the Solano County Fair at Vallejo (July 12 through July 24).

Santa Anita media and marketing officials reported on the success of their winter meet, which showed increases in nearly all major handle and attendance categories, including a 15-percent increase over the previous year in on-track average daily attendance and a 10-percent increase in on-track average daily handle. Marketing Vice President Allen Gutterman said good weather was a key, along with a significant financial commitment from Santa Anita for a strong promotional campaign throughout the meet. He also credited Publicity Director Mike Willman for working with the news media to gain increased coverage of racing at Santa Anita.

“It was a phenomenal job you did,” said Shapiro. “It’s wonderful for us to get a report with these kind of numbers.”

In a discussion of the trial program that the CHRB recently authorized for just the current meets at Hollywood Park and Bay Meadows allowing for uncoupling horses with the same owner, representatives of the TOC and CTT indicted their respective boards had voted against uncoupling the horses.

“This is a trial run,” said Moss, who chairs the Pari-Mutuel Operations Committee that recommended the change after hearing from the public during several open meetings. “My feeling is, let’s see what the trial says, and then go from there.”

Shapiro noted that Jack Liebau, president of both Hollywood Park and Bay Meadows, has agreed to create a data base of information on the trial, including how many times the uncoupling occurs, the odds of the same-owner horses, where each horse finishes, and other information the commissioner can consider when reviewing the results of the experiment.

The Board authorized staff to place a proposed amendment out for public notice that would bring the CHRB rule concerning the allowable length of the driver's whip in standardbred racing into accordance with changes made by the US Trotting Association.

The Board instructed staff to continue drafting an amendment for future consideration that would revise the expiration date of one-year licenses and would allow grooms and other stable employees to obtain licenses for longer periods (two or three years) following a successful first-year probation period for the same fee as the one-year license.

The Board approved contracts for stewards (\$1,720,000), official veterinarians (\$488,000) and other service contracts totaling \$3.5 million, including \$2.2 million for equine drug testing.

Under general business, Halpern publicly thanked two of the commissioners for private donations they each made to benefit backstretch workers and their families. He said Bianco, along with the Oak Tree Racing Association, donated money allowing the CTT to arrange for 151 families to receive professional assistance with their tax returns. And he acknowledged a "generous contribution" by Moss and his wife, Ann, to the Edwin Gregson Foundation, which provides scholarships to the children of backstretch workers.

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