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Medication Is Cited in Horse Racing's Decline in U.S.

By JOE DRAPE

The American thoroughbred industry has acknowledged recently that it is in trouble, and on Monday, its counterparts from around the world told it why: it races too often, allows race-day medications that prop up inferior horses and is paying the price for these flaws with plummeting sales at breeding auctions.

“European buyers are drifting away because we view the performances of U.S. horses with skepticism because of the medication policies, and the stallions are not comparable to ‘clean’ European stallions,” Denis Egan, the chief executive of the Irish Turf Club, which is responsible for regulating Ireland’s racing industry, said at an International Summit on Race Day Medication at [Belmont Park](#).

With bipartisan legislation calling for federal regulation of performance-enhancing drugs and medications as well as stiff penalties for offenders, horse racing’s stakeholders are taking a hard look at their medication rules.

The National Thoroughbred Racing Association, one of three sponsors of the forum, offered polling numbers from 2008 and 2009 that showed its core fans’ positive impression of the sport more than doubled after the industry prohibited anabolic steroids around that time and initiated an injury-reporting system and safety measures. Still, John Della Volpe, a consultant hired by industry groups, said that racing fans wanted even higher levels of integrity.

“Make everything public and publicize the results,” said Della Volpe, who also is the director of polling at [Harvard University’s Institute of Politics](#). “I can’t tell you what to do, but do it collaboratively. Do it transparently. Do it for the health and safety of your athletes and with the industry’s fans and futures in mind.”

The thoroughbred racing industry is in a downward spiral. From 2007 through 2010, the annual registered thoroughbred foal crop in the United States slipped 19 percent, the races run declined 9.6 percent and purses decreased 12.6 percent.

The amount of money bet has fallen by 22.5 percent, from nearly \$14.7 billion in 2007 to \$11.4 billion in 2010. The North American auction market for yearlings has fallen by almost half, from \$561 million in 2007 to \$302 million in 2010.

The debate over race-day medication has focused on furosemide, a diuretic known as Lasix that has been used to treat racehorses since the 1970s. The medication stems exercise-induced pulmonary hemorrhage, or bleeding, in their lungs. Most countries ban the use of Lasix on race days because it improves performance. In the United States, however, virtually every horse receives it on the day of the race.

Veterinarians and racing officials here from England, Ireland and Hong Kong, backed by data from jurisdictions across the world, told their American colleagues that they were medicating horses who did not need it. There are not that many severe bleeders, and the ones who are are being kept on the track with Lasix and should be not be racing, anyway.

Bill Nader, the executive director of the Hong Kong Jockey Club, said that Hong Kong did not allow Lasix on race day or any other day. It averages only 42 incidents of bleeding a season. After the first incident, a horse is banned from racing for three months. If there is a second incident, Nader said, the horses are often forced to retire.

The Hong Kong Jockey Club has perhaps the most restrictive medication rules in the world. Over the past five years, it has had only eight sudden deaths among 45,000 runners, or one per 5,692 starters. The American fatality rate is 2.14 per 1,000 starters.

Nader, a longtime executive with the New York Racing Association, said that Hong Kong's commitment to integrity also meant stiff punishments for trainers and jockeys, as well as transparency — the veterinary history of each of its horses is available to the public.

The strict policies, he said, were good for business. Even though Hong Kong has a population of seven million and races only 83 days a year, bettors put \$10.3 billion through the windows last year, almost as much as the United States.

“The quality of our racing is at a very high standard, our customers demand it, and horse racing is the No. 1 sport by far,” Nader said. “It’s really quite refreshing coming from America.”

The Hall of Fame trainer Richard Mandella was among a panel of trainers that acknowledged that Lasix was a performance-enhancing drug and that he and his colleagues could do without it. “Racing will go on with it or without it,” he said.

Dr. Anthony Stirk, the senior veterinary adviser to the British Horse Racing Authority, said that it would benefit American horsemen to get in step with the rest of the world, not only in medication policies but also in racing less frequently.

“My worries for American racing is that you’ve become isolated,” he said. “We want to see more international racing.”