A dozen horses line up, ready to spring. The gates snap open, the alarm bell sounds: “And they’re off!”

Few sports match the pure excitement of thoroughbred racing. For those who appreciate its color, speed, and furious athleticism, races held on thick green turf are the best. Those grass surfaces require a great deal more tender loving care and vigilance than racing’s more commonly used dirt-and-sand surfaces.

Cultivating and maintaining horseracing turf is, like horse racing itself, both a science and an art that keeps evolving over time.

New York is home to some of the nation’s best, and best known, racetracks. Near New York City, Belmont and Aqueduct dominate the downstate markets while upstate, Saratoga is New York Racing Association’s (NYRA) venue of highest rank. NYRA rotates the racing schedule throughout the year so only one of these three major tracks is operating at a time. The man responsible for making the “playing field” level for all competitors, on all surfaces, at all three tracks, is Jerry Porcelli, Track Superintendent.

To keep the turf in peak form, Porcelli must respond to numerous challenges, including some that most turf managers don’t: the direct impact of horses’ hooves, and geese. Porcelli has the easy confidence of one who knows his trade well. He’s also someone who does not hesitate to solicit the opinions of peers at other top tracks that dot the US, or consult with academia’s most highly regarded turf specialists.

Porcelli says, “A few years ago we heard that Dr. Frank Rossi of Cornell University was the ‘go-to’ guy at Yankee Stadium. His methods keep their turf fit for baseball’s most demanding owner, George Steinbrenner. We had a series of

ALL THREE TRACKS USE A KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS BLEND THAT INCLUDES JEFFERSON, LIBERATOR, RAMBO, AND MIDNIGHT.
On race days, according to Sinacori, after every turf race, crews go out onto the course like hunters on safari with specially tweaked shovels, filling in divots with dirt, and making other needed "course corrections."

Another tactic used during the long racing season is pushing out the rail that marks the inner border of the course. This gives the inside 10 feet of the grass oval a rest for a few weeks. Later, the fence can be moved back to its original position, or even farther in, giving the outer section its own needed R&R. This keeps the entire turf surface as uniformly intact as possible from the inside post position to the outermost racing slots.

Uninvited poultry are another noteworthy problem for these NYRA turf courses.

In the last 10-15 years, changing migratory patterns of Canada geese (due to generally warmer temperatures) have brought much larger geese populations to New York, presenting three key challenges for turf managers.

The goose feces makes footing far more slippery and treacherous for horses at full gallop, and geese devour grass blades right down to the roots. On top of that, the actual presence of geese on the turf course during a race increases the odds of injury to horses and/or jockeys. Consequently, Porcelli has adopted a zero-tolerance policy for geese, retaining the services of a Long Island firm, Geese-Off, to handle such sticky problems in a humane way.

Geese-Off’s strategies have been enormously successful, he says. By using specially trained border collies in the early morning hours and deploying very real looking, plastic border collie statues for the rest of the day, the potential threats of goose traffic on turf grass can be held in check. Geese-Off also uses high luminescence products (lights and lasers), and pyrotechnic devices that do not harm the birds.

For Jerry Porcelli, Pete Sinacori and the hardworking crews that carry out their carefully devised strategies, grounds keeping success means healthy, luscious looking turf grass courses for some of the nation’s best race horses and jockeys to compete on. It also means great recreational fun for the sporting public.