

BY MARK HUSSEY

New York turf courses get royal treatment

Adozen 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

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Photos courtesy of NYRA

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consultations with Dr. Rossi in 2002, which resulted in an enhanced turf cultivation and maintenance program for us.

“We introduced that program at Saratoga on an experimental basis,” Porcelli says. “Early indications are it’s working well, and when that’s confirmed in another year or so, we’ll roll it out at Belmont and Aqueduct too.”

The enhanced program features lower grass height (in periods of normal weather), cut to about 4 inches, and use of a plant growth regulator (Primo-Max). Porcelli applies the PGR at five ounces per acre to significantly increase grass density. Additionally, as turf growth is systematically slowed, less frequent mowing becomes a secondary benefit.

“It makes a critical difference because a thicker turf holds up better to the wear and tear caused by the horses, and makes repairs easier. Denser turf also creates smoother surfaces for horses to run on, especially when the grass height’s been lowered,” says Porcelli.

Getting that turf grass growing in the first place is, of course, another challenge altogether. All three tracks use a Kentucky bluegrass, mixed-resistance seed blend that includes several sub-types: Jefferson, Liberator, Rambo, and Midnight. It is a custom-crafted formulation that has proven itself over the years for New York’s particular soil and climate conditions.

Under the watch of foremen who report to Porcelli and Assistant Track Superintendent Peter Sinacori, crews of 13 men follow seeding at Belmont and Aqueduct with ammonium nitrate (34.0) applications in early spring at the rate of 125 pounds per acre, along with 230 pounds per acre of 19-5-9 fertilizer.

In late May, these applications are repeated. Fungicide and herbicides are introduced in late April, with fungicide applications continuing at 7-10 day intervals through the end of September. Liming is done in December, if deemed necessary, at the rate of one ton per acre.

Schedules and application treatments vary somewhat for the more northerly, and more inland, Saratoga track.

“A primary goal for us is always keeping an ideal moisture ratio,” Sinacori says. “Too much or too little moisture can lead to problems quickly, so the moisture status of turf requires constant monitoring.”

In recent years, irrigation has become a far easier task through use of automatic pop-up sprinkler systems at Belmont and Aqueduct. At Saratoga, however, perhaps in keeping with its classic, venerable image, irrigation is still done manually and is more labor intensive.

“Actually, if the money was there, we’d probably automate Saratoga’s irrigation too,” Porcelli says.

Even under ideal conditions, any well-tended horse racing turf course takes quite a beating after a few weeks. So Jerry Porcelli’s crews must regularly maintain rigorous discipline.

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 larg-

er 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



These dogs work hard but do not require much chow. Jerry Porcelli, left, and Peter Sinacori pose with two of the plastic border collie statues that keep goose traffic off the track’s turf.

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. **ST**