



Horse racing's Field Day a winning bet for track superintendents

While horses are, naturally, the focus of Thoroughbred racing fans, it is the ground beneath them that is the focus, if not obsession, of track executives. After all, it is the quality, fairness and consistency of a racetrack's surfaces that can make the difference between popularity and scorn, profit and loss, or even life and death.

For starters, owners and trainers want to race their horses over surfaces—be they turf, dirt or synthetic, the three main types in North America—that minimize the risk of injury. If a racetrack wants to attract the top horses in training, which translates into increased betting, they need to have perfectly groomed and manicured ovals. There are typically so many tracks running on any given day that horse owners have the luxury of choosing the ones that are kindest to their pricey investments.

Meanwhile, these racing surfaces need to withstand the pounding of weather as well as the pounding of hooves. If a turf course takes 2 inches of rain overnight, will it be dry enough to run across the next day without ruining it for weeks after? If there are thousands of divots in the grass from one race, will the maintenance team be able to have them filled before the next one? Gamblers prefer betting on turf races, so every time a contest scheduled for the grass course can't be run on its intended surface it can cost a major racetrack tens of thousands of dollars.

Consistency is also key. Handicappers insist on surfaces that give every horse a fair chance of winning, regardless of whether the horse is a "pacesetter" or a "closer." Surfaces that aren't cared for diligently are more likely to develop a "bias," which is racing parlance for a consistency that favors one style over another. If the soil is more packed together on the inside of a track, horses racing along the rail will have a distinct advantage because it will take them less effort to skip across it. Similarly, a turf course with too much water in it can favor the closers, horses who do their best running in the late stages of a race, as the early leaders will use up precious energy digging into the sodden

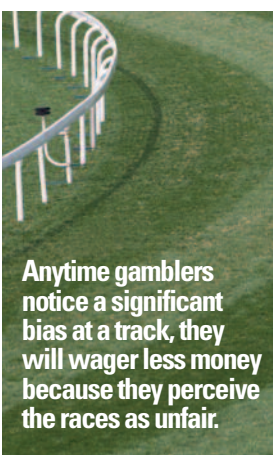
ground. Anytime gamblers notice a significant bias at a track, they will wager less money because they perceive the races as unfair.

Safety is still another reason why high quality surfaces go hand-in-hand with good track management. If any of your material is too hard it can endanger the lives of horses and riders. The 1,200-pound horse running 40 miles per hour is more likely to break a leg if it is pounding its hooves on a dry course that plays like asphalt. Meanwhile, for the jockey that falls off, the "give" in a surface can mean the difference between career-ending paralysis and minor bruising.

It is with all of this in mind that the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, the membership-based trade organization with offices in New York City and Lexington, KY, has supported the Track Superintendents' and Arena Managers' Field Day since its inception in 2001.

"We started the track superintendent meetings to learn from one another, as well as share information about new techniques and technologies being used by other tracks," said George McDermott, former track superintendent at Lone Star Park, a premier Thoroughbred and American Quarter Horse racing venue in the heart of Dallas-Fort Worth that hosted the Breeders' Cup World Thoroughbred Championships in 2004.

Twelve years later, what started as a modest gathering has turned into an essential conference for track maintenance professionals. The 2013 Field Day, hosted in August at the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club near San Diego, attracted a record 120 registrants from six countries and US territo-



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ries for workshops and presentations on the latest technologies affecting track maintenance. Participants earn credit for the Safety Training and Continuing Education component of the NTRA's Safety and Integrity Alliance Code of Standards, an industry initiative that assures best practices are in place at the nation's most recognizable racetracks.

"The 'track super' meeting has had great support by tracks in North America and we're now attracting managers from Dubai, Europe and Asia," said Roy Smith, track superintendent at Parx Racing near Philadelphia and a founder of the Field Day. "All are interested in the same goal: making the surfaces safe for the horses and humans, as well as providing the betting public the assurance of a level playing field for all competitors."

The gathering is especially important because racetrack maintenance is a specialty that, despite the billions of dollars that depend on it, can't be gleaned from a text book.

"You don't learn how to manage a dirt, turf or synthetic course in school," said Javier Barajas, track superintendent for both the Dubai Racing Club in the United Arab Emirates and Canterbury Park near the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN. "It's very much a hands-on learning experience and I've been glad to assist and teach others what works for me."

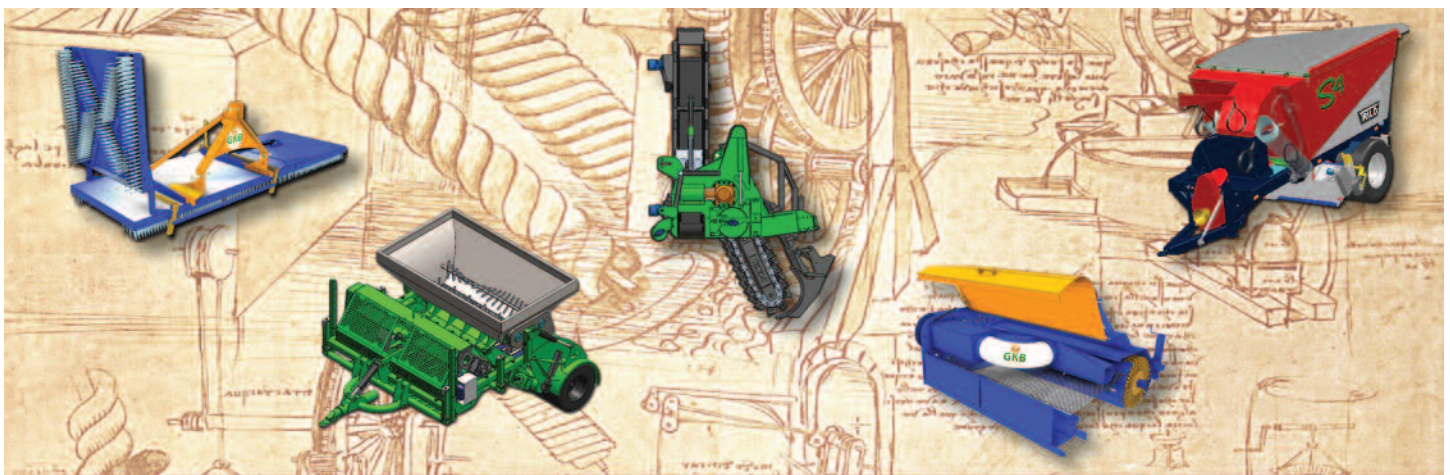
The significance of Field Day was reinforced earlier this year with

the addition of the event's first title sponsor in John Deere. At what is now known as Track Superintendents' and Arena Managers' Field Day Presented by John Deere, the tractor giant benefits from increased exposure in front of decision-makers who spend millions on coddling their terra firma, while track superintendents receive NTRA member discounts on equipment that can make a direct and significant impact to their bottom line.

Additional Field Day sponsors include Stabilizer Solutions, Toro, Hunter Industries, Valvoline, MD Barnmaster, Horsemen's Track & Equipment, AGCO's Challenger and Massey, Arbico Organics, Larcom & Mitchell, Equine Savings, Global Barrier Systems, and Duralock, Ltd.

"There is no comparable gathering for people invested in building and maintaining safe and fair track surfaces," said Bryan Pettigrew, senior vice president of NTRA, who spearheads the industry association's support of the Field Day. "Participation continues to grow, which just shows you that people are waking up to the importance of good track maintenance."

For information on the 2014 Track Superintendents' and Arena Managers' Field Day Presented by John Deere, contact Heather Brown at hbrown@ntra.com or 866-678-4289. ■



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