

# TDN

THOROUGHBRED DAILY NEWS

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2010**

For information about TDN, call 732-747-8060.



Excerpted from Bill Oppenheim's sire report in *Thoroughbred Daily News*, February 3, 2010, pp. 7-8.  
[www.thoroughbreddailynews.com](http://www.thoroughbreddailynews.com)

## U.S Racing: the Surface Debate

This is a really emotive subject, and is generating a lot of heat on both sides of the debate. In just about any argument, debate, opposition or even divergence of views, it can be really helpful to step back a little bit and think about what are the real issues at stake. Understanding one's own assumptions, the premises from which we build our cases, can often shed light on people's motivations, and even help resolve the conflict.

So I'd like to state my assumptions, to be agreed with, disagreed with, or dismissed. They are actually my view of political reality as it applies to horse racing in the United States. First, I think this industry is deeply vulnerable to animal-rights activists and other do-gooders who couldn't give a rat's ass about horse racing, think there is something cruel as well as dodgy about it, and were getting very stirred up by the time Barbaro, George Washington, and Eight Belles had all died as a result of racetrack injuries suffered on dirt. I don't see where we as the industry even have the luxury to actually have this debate. The very installation of 'all-weather' synthetic surfaces even then played a part in persuading the outside world we were addressing the problem.

My second assumption is that, to avoid being put back in the position where the industry is defending its very existence in

the U.S. (this is not an issue in other countries), the industry must embrace the safer option, period. Because—assumption number three—the U.S. industry is far too weak and disorganized to defend itself, politically, if it were to come under serious public attack. I really see this as a political issue, wider than a debate which can remain internal to the industry. So I actually don't care if it's dirt, synthetic, or Swiss cheese, as long as we can assure the public it is safer.

And, yes, assumption number four: 'safer' is defined as fatalities on the racetrack. That's all that matters. Hind end injuries, this problem, that problem—look, I'm not dismissing them. They are problems. But the major premise, the one which is central to my eventual conclusion, is this: for the reasons I have stated, which I think are essentially political reasons, safety trumps all. Whatever is safer, that's what I'm for. So I'm for synthetics. However, as a caveat to that, the ultimate surface for American racing must also be safer for jockeys when they hit the deck, and it's unclear whether sufficient research on that issue has been undertaken. It's no good having a surface safer for horses if there isn't sufficient cushion for jockeys as well. It may be that, as Del Mar's Polytrack rode the first year, slower is better.

In Bill Finley's excellent *TDN* magazine report, Ground Control, he cites California

Horse Racing Board equine medical director Dr. Rick Arthur's reports on fatal racetrack breakdowns before and since the installation of synthetics. It is very significant—a 45 percent reduction. Every report cited shows a reduction in breakdowns. All right, there will be a definitive Jockey Club report at some point, we don't know when. But it doesn't sound like it's going to say dirt tracks are safer.

The California trainers, racetrack owners, handicappers and others who want to 'revert to dirt' clearly do not share my assumptions; if they did, they wouldn't want go back to dirt. But answer this, proponents of reverting to dirt: what are you going to say the next time there is a catastrophic breakdown on dirt on national television? Because the odds are that's going to happen. And then, what? We have to pitch precious energy, time, resources into defending ourselves? And, proponents of reverting to dirt, what are your assumptions, and/or motivations?

And, to the extent you may be motivated by the difficulties of adaptation, isn't the history of evolution that adaptation and survival are preferable to extinction? Is horse racing exempt from the principles of evolution? Do we have some 'divine right' to exist? No, we don't. We have to work for it like everybody and everything else.

There are a number of important economic side issues which also lead me to favor synthetics, especially that domestic racing is likely to grow more with synthetic rather than dirt surfaces, both in terms of field sizes (more imports keener to run on synthetic, now that it is in use so much internationally) and export of U.S. races for betting internationally, which could generate significant revenue for the domestic industry. That almost certainly applies to Breeders' Cup races, but it's by no means limited to them. But I don't think these are the central issues. I think safety trumps everything, and, as long as synthetic surfaces are resulting in fewer fatal

breakdowns (and can be adjusted to provide more cushion for jockeys), we should be embracing them and allocating our energies and resources to iron out the problems they're encountering (like 2,000 horses training and then racing on them), rather than reverting to surfaces which the odds are will sooner rather than later result in throwing the entire industry back on the defensive.