

## **Time to appoint a national horse racing commissioner**

By Terry Conway

Think the NFL has the market cornered on on renegades and clueless competitors?

Think again.

Four days after the sport of horse racing was put under intense scrutiny during the Congressional subcommittee hearing on "Breeding, Drugs, and Breakdowns" (June 19), jockey Jeremy Rose stepped into the spotlight.

Battling for the lead down the stretch in a Delaware Park race, Rose sliced his mount Appeal to the City across her face with his whip causing hemoraging of the left eye that sent the 5-year old mare to the New Bolton Center for treatment.

Initially, Rose, best known as the rider of dual classic winner Afleet Alex in 2005, tried to get a stay of the punishment until his appeal is heard. After his lawyer witnessed the firestorm that erupted, the jockey agreed to sit out until his hearing on July 22.

Two days later trainer Rick Dutrow was slapped with a 15-day suspension when tests revealed that Salute the Count had double the amount of the illegal drug Clebuterol in his system after finishing second in a Churchill Downs race in early May. Clenuterol is used to maximize a horse's breathing while working out at the track.

Dutrow, who seems perplexed about what all the fuss is about, filed an appeal so that he can continue preparing Big Brown and other top horses for upcoming stakes races.

The following day the Texas Racing Commission reported that top trainer Steve Asmussen's Timber Trick tested positive for lidocaine after winning a race at Lone Star Park. He conditions reigning Horse of the Year Curlin and currently ranks first in wins and earnings (\$15 million) by a North American trainer.

Prior to all that Larry Jones, the trainer of Hard Spun and Eight Belles, was cited for a positive drug test. It was his first medication violation in 27 years and the timing was highly suspicious. Jones and owner Jim Squires, both outspoken critics of medication abuse, say they were set up. The violation came to light the week of the House hearings.

Both Rose and Asmussen face lengthy suspensions. Delaware Racing Commissioner John Wayne hit Rose with a six-month vacation. Texas' zero-tolerance policy calls for Asmussen to receive a suspension between six and 12 months if he's found guilty.

It won't be the first time. The trainer served a six-month suspension for medication violations in Louisiana and New Mexico in 2006.

As for Dutrow, not surprisingly, the trainer was a no show to answer questions from the Congressional committee. Has anyone in history of the Triple Crown series done more damage to the sport than this guy?

Here is a prediction: the racing's "powers that be" will say they're making great strides and need more time to come up with solutions.

That's an approach that no longer flies. It's way past time to clean up Dodge.

In the NFL the police blotters have been relatively quiet since the league's new sheriff, commissioner Roger Goodell, went on a suspension spree last year.

Racing has no central power. Instead, it's an antiquated system with a patchwork of rules governing the sport in 38 major racing jurisdictions. Most have competing agendas. They seem more concerned with holding on to power than resolving serious issues.

Racing's most pressing issues— rules on medication, drug testing, track surfaces and its wagering system (that is technologically outdated)-- are regulated by individual state racing boards with varying rules.

Nationally, racing has established commissions, appointed committees, ad nauseum. It hasn't worked, in forever.

"A lot of owners are tired of committees and talk, and nothing happening," said Roy Jackson, owner of Lael Stable outside West Grove who attended the Congressional hearings.

"We're bordering on a serious confidence problem as far as our racing fans and the betting public."

The industry needs a national commissioner. Appoint someone who is independent of any special interest group, someone who could bring everybody together.

Rick Porter, the owner of Hard Spun and Eight Belles who lives in Wilmington, has long championed the idea of a racing "czar."

"There is absolutely no accountability to anyone," Porter noted. "We're sinking to new lows. The racetracks are the sport's teams. If you pulled some of this stuff in the NFL or major league baseball you might not have a franchise six months later.

"A commissioner could act swiftly and address many of our problems. The old-line establishments like the Jockey Club or racing associations can't force compliance with rules."

While Porter is no fan of federal regulation, he said the Congressional subcommittee got everyone's attention when it waved a big stick.

The same year racing experienced its last Triple Crown winner (1978) Congress approved the Interstate Horseracing Act (IAH). It is, arguably, the most important piece of legislation for the horse racing industry. It gave horse racing the legal right to broadcast races and take bets across state lines.

Over the years it has evolved into simulcasting and advance-deposit wagering. Last year nearly 90 percent of the \$15.4 billion bet on thoroughbred racing came from simulcasting or off-track betting.

Members of Congress have talked about amending the IHA Act to force compliance with reforms. For instance, the IAH Act could be used to divert money from simulcasting revenues to pay for drug testing, jockey insurance, track surface research and other pertinent issues. In other words, do it, or lose your simulcasting rights.

Congress also could mandate the hiring of a national horse racing commissioner.

“No question we need a central power,” Jackson noted. “I think the House members were knowledgeable and tuned into our problems, Jackson noted. “But I also heard the message: if you can’t get your house in order then we’ll do it for you.”

**GALLOPING OUT**— Next weekend marks the 67th running of the \$1 million Grade II Delaware Handicap. The Festival of Racing (July 12-13) also features the \$500,000 Grade II Delaware Oaks, Caesar Rodney, Barbaro, Robert G. Dick, Carpenter Memorial, and Light Hearted stakes. Total purses for the major seven stakes races are \$2.5 million.

Curlin, the 2007 Horse of the Year, has been nominated to run in the \$200,000 Caesar Rodney turf race next Sunday. While the odds are he’ll race in Chicago or New York, there’s a chance the superstar colt could turn up at Delaware Park. Having beaten the best in the world on dirt Curlin took his first step last Tuesday toward tackling another challenge: racing on grass.

He passed the first test working seven furlongs easily. Majority owner Jess Jackson has an eye on Europe’s most prestigious race for older horses, the Arc de Triomphe at Longchamps in Paris on October 5. Curlin is less than \$700,000 away from Cigar’s all-time earnings mark of \$9,999,185.

To contact Terry Conway, email [conway@dol.net](mailto:conway@dol.net)