



Dishing the dirt on synthetic tracks: they're on the way

MAX
PRESNELL



THE worldwide swing is towards synthetic-track racecourses.

Yes, periodically enthusiasm erupts for dirt, which sends the hair of Bart Cummings a shade greyer, and more than 20 years ago the Sydney Turf Club, with prompting from chief executive Pat Parker, wanted to introduce a synthetic circuit on the inside of Canterbury for all-weather, all-club racing in times of excessive wet. The Racecourse Development Fund, in charge of the handouts at the time, would have none of it, perhaps lacking in vision or showing good instinct in not going into an area in which the right mix is vital.

Now the climate has changed in more ways than one. "The whole of the USA will have these tracks in three years [and] already 30 per cent of racing run in England is on synthetic tracks," Stephen Allanson, the Racing Victoria chief executive and a major speaker on the subject, said at the recent Asian Racing Conference in Dubai.

Nick Nicholson, president of The Keeneland Association in Lexington, Kentucky, stressed: "It [installing synthetic tracks] is a huge leap forward for the safety of the rider and safety of the horse."

Keeneland installs Polytrack and is the North American distributor, while Allanson maintains Racing Victoria is not in the "track construction business ... we did this to save money and to have control of our own destiny, not have to rely on others for maintenance [of existing tracks]".

During the week officials from

Santa Anita have visited NSW training synthetic tracks, including at the STC's Rosehill, with the American swing away from dirt tracks due to cries they would break down a Sherman tank.

The major problem in Australia with the kindest and best racing surface, grass, is water.

"We have dozens of racecourses under threat with the drought," Allanson agreed. "However, our draft for synthetic-track racing wasn't started on a drought-proofing strategy. It was based on being cost-effective, and extending our ability to race through winter months. Before it stopped raining, the Victorian tracks in winter took an awful bashing. In spring our better tracks would be suffering wear and tear. We were always looking for an alternate to use in cooler months.

"We'd like to race in the twilight when all the people are in pubs and clubs and pick up some of the revenue harness and greyhounds are taking away. That was our original motivation but has been exacerbated due to the drought. These [synthetic] tracks require relatively no water to maintain."

Obviously the formula must be right, a situation of which Bob Bentley, the driving force behind the rise of Queensland racing and never slow out of the gates, is aware. Bentley, hardly a junket junkie, was also at Dubai, making his first appearance though eligible since 1990, seeking enlightenment on synthetics.

"It's the way of the future, especially in Queensland with the

water shortage," Bentley maintained. "But also from the injury point of view for young horses. The attrition rate for young horses on tracks we have now is very high. Every training track in Australia is substandard. I don't think many are properly maintained. To maintain even a good sand track takes an enormous amount of water and time.

"But synthetics have issues that are absolutely critical. One is they haven't perfected one that will stand up in the tropics or subtropics. You can't throw it down, and it must be maintained properly. We are working with the Singapore Turf Club [which is putting down two different substances].

"We have called for expressions of interest to do three tracks: one at Caloundra, the Gold Coast and Toowoomba," Bentley added.

"Caloundra will be the first because of a big opportunity for twilight racing there and at the Gold Coast in the summer months.

"The biggest trouble [with synthetics] is the breakdown of the substance through contamination, [because of] horses coming on with mud, manure and straw on their feet. You have to keep them clean. None of the physical things are insurmountable. Swimming pools for horses have 'walk-throughs' where the muck comes off.

"Horses are more competent on synthetics because of the level surface and a bit of cushion. You don't get knuckling over. It's consistent right across, no bias.

"A lot [of synthetics] have been



tried and failed but for different reasons. Most are made of recycled material. No two tracks are exactly the same. It depends what's available for recycling. [The track at Lingfield [in Britain] is made from a binder from old telephone cable with the old wax around it, chopped into small lengths.

"What's successful, though, in Canberra wouldn't suit Queensland. You could get a clagging effect and throw-back. We have a mountain of material, but our four most favoured surfaces are being analysed by the University of Technology at Toowoomba."

Allanson agrees on the formula aspect and Viscoride tracks were introduced years back to Caulfield and Flemington. "We developed our own formula, called

ThoroughTrack, and patented that," he said. "We put our first in at Seymour, then did the track at Canberra, which raced last season, and the response is positive.

"To be successful for racing the last thing required was small fields. We are making sure enough of the horse population has access to work and train on these tracks. We made our critical mass at 70 per cent. Cranbourne, Flemington and Caulfield is only about 40 per cent of the horse population. Seymour is small, but a test track to iron out laying-out problems and maintenance. We put in our next one at Ballarat, then Mornington two months back. Mornington is our second-biggest training centre after Cranbourne. We are now in the

process of establishing one on the inside at Geelong, which is big enough to race on, starting on May 13. Also with Warrnambool, Bendigo and Geelong coming up we will have 75 to 80 per cent on synthetic training tracks.

"To get it racing effectively it [the synthetic track] must be on a course proper under lights, looks great at night. Having it as a B-track will pull B-class horses. We are assessing a lot of tracks for the lights ... somewhere close to Melbourne, like Werribee or Pakenham, just outside the greater suburban area. After Friday night [racing] at Moonee Valley closes we'll have twilight racing in the afternoon in June, July and September."



Rock and a hard place ... Cessnock racecourse manager Jody Rodgers inspects the track. The situation is so dire the club has applied to move its meeting on Tuesday week to Newcastle. Photo: Dean Osland