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The Right Track: Should Kentucky Mandate Synthetic Thoroughbred Racetrack Surfaces? ([/full-blog/2011/11/right-track-should-kentucky-mandate.html](#))



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Kate Remias, Staff Member

Headlines of a Thoroughbred's career or life ending injuries have long prompted questions of causation and fault, but a new variable is being brought to the forefront of this blame game: track surfaces. Synthetic track surfaces are being hailed as the safety savior to a troubled sport, and California has gone so far as to require the state's major tracks have synthetic surfaces.[1] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn1) This begs the question of whether Kentucky should follow suit.

Supporters of synthetic surfaces offer impressive numbers backing superior safety claims, but critics posit that data is incomplete. Supporters point to improved safety statistics, such as 2010 data indicating synthetic tracks had fewer career ending incidents than dirt and turf tracks.[2] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn2) or a two-year study revealing synthetic tracks had fewer fatalities per start than natural surfaces.[3] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn3) Critics, however, say the tracks do not reduce injuries, they create different ones; reducing fatal or career ending fractures and chips but increasing soft-tissue damage.[4] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn4) Some veterinarians noted synthetics decrease injuries to the front-end of the horse but increase hind-end injuries. [5] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn5) Synthetic surfaces have potential, but there is still a legitimate fear of the unknown weighing heavily against mandating these surfaces.

The need for mandating track surface standards is mitigated by market forces already protecting safety standards. When horses are injured physically, the industry is injured fiscally. After Barbaro's breakdown, officials noted the injury would cause decreases in fans and ticket sales. [6] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn6) Eight Belles' breakdown induced headlines calling for the end of Thoroughbred racing.[7] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn7) Market forces incentivize safety, and the Kentucky Thoroughbred racing industry responds to those forces. Absent regulation, Kentucky's Turfway Park was the first United States success story of a synthetic main track.[8] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn8) Keeneland used a synthetic training track the year prior, and was an integral force in introducing synthetics to the American market.[9] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn9) Market forces already guiding Kentucky's industry safety standards mitigate the need for outside regulation, especially where there are still questions regarding long term safety consequences.

While synthetic surfaces certainly have potential, currently insufficient data coupled with market forces already protecting safety indicate mandating synthetics is not yet necessary.

[1] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref1) Press Release, Cal. Horse Racing Bd., Board Mandates Synthetic Surfaces (May 25, 2006), *available at* http://chr.ca.gov/press_releases/2006_05_25_press_release.pdf (http://chr.ca.gov/press_releases/2006_05_25_press_release.pdf).

[2] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref2) *Career-Ending Did Not Finish Stats by Track*, Keeneland,<http://www.keeneland.com/lists/copy/copy.aspx?Page=Career%20Ending> (<http://www.keeneland.com/lists/copy/copy.aspx?Page=Career%20Ending>) (last visited Sept. 26, 2011).

[3] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref3) *The Jockey Club Releases Updates Statistics from the Equine Injury Database*, The Jockey Club (Dec. 15, 2010), <http://www.jockeyclub.com/mediaCenter.asp?story=470> (<http://www.jockeyclub.com/mediaCenter.asp?story=470>).

[4] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref4) Andrew Wolfson, *Horse Deaths Drop on Synthetic Tracks: Quality Varies and Cost, Upkeep High*, *Courier-Journal.com* (Aug. 18, 2008, 4:21 AM),<http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20080818/EXTRAS03/808180406/Horse-deaths-drop-synthetic-tracks> (<http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20080818/EXTRAS03/808180406/Horse-deaths-drop-synthetic-tracks>).

[5] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref5) Amanda H. Duckworth, *Right Direction: Racetrack Vets See Fewer Catastrophic Injuries, But More Hind-End Problems*, *The Blood-Horse*, Dec. 8, 2007, at 6988, available at http://www.bloodhorse.com/pdf/synthetic_surfaces_special_report_120807.pdf (http://www.bloodhorse.com/pdf/synthetic_surfaces_special_report_120807.pdf).

[6] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref6) Matt Hegarty, *Barbaro's Injury Could be Bad for Business: Would-be Racing Fans Turned off to Sport by Witnessing Mishap*, *NBC Sports* (May 24, 2006, 2:35 PM), <http://nbcsports.msnbc.com/id/12935222/> (<http://nbcsports.msnbc.com/id/12935222/>).

[7] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref7) See Andrew Beyer, *For Whom Is Eight Belles's Toll?*, *Wash. Post*, (May 12, 2008), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/05/11/ST2008051102458.html> (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/05/11/ST2008051102458.html>); Ed Berliner, *Death at The Kentucky Derby: Eight Belles Tolls for Thoroughbred Racing*, *Bleacher Report* (May 3, 2008) <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/21227-death-at-the-kentucky-derby-eight-belles-tolls-for-thoroughbred-racing> (<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/21227-death-at-the-kentucky-derby-eight-belles-tolls-for-thoroughbred-racing>).

[8] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref8) Hegarty, *supra* note 6.

[9] (http://www.blogger.com/post-create.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref9) *Id.*

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