



Op/ed

by Frankie Lovato Jr.

WHAT THE "BUZZ" IS REALLY ALL ABOUT

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After watching the GII Pennsylvania Derby this weekend, where Will Take Charge once again got the better of Moreno, I felt even more compelled to write about the accusation and ongoing investigation of jockey Luis Saez using a buzzer during his winning ride in this summer's GI Travers S. A buzzer, better known in the business as a "battery" or "machine," is an outlawed battery-powered electrical shock device. This device is about the size of a Bic lighter or thumb drive and can be made with regular over-the-counter batteries such as (2) triple A's wrapped with copper wire with two extruding prongs all bound together with electrical tape. I am not an expert on machines, but I do consider myself an expert at race riding. Personally, I never have or ever thought once to use a machine, but I know a little more than most from my lifetime of experience in horse racing.

When I started my career, being around some of the smaller minor league tracks, I know that machines were not so uncommon. Like my father, I would never dare touch one and made a point to stay miles away from anything to do with them. They were certainly outlawed over 30 years ago as they are now, but still, they were around. At the meet where I started as an apprentice, machines were present. It was already halfway through when I arrived and I left that meet second leading rider, winning at a 19% clip, without a machine.

It wasn't unusual back then to have "shake downs," where racing officials would unexpectedly burst in the jocks room searching jockey's boxes (lockers) or hold a race up just as they had loaded into the gates, to pull a jockey off their horse in order to search them. Being caught with a machine, even if it was found sitting in your car, was enough to lose your license. The practices of having shakedown are now pretty much extinct--even at the smaller tracks--as the machine days have begun fading away since I started out over 30 years ago.

When I arrived in New York to continue my apprentice campaign, machines were nowhere to be found and there was absolutely no interest or appeal for them among the New York jockey colony. Gladly, I never had any adjustments to make.

The idea of Saez using a machine in a Grade I event is mind boggling, with not only thousands of people watching, officials, and in house coverage, but there were also NBC high definition cameras everywhere.

There is no on/off switch on a machine and those extruding prongs sticking out of one side are live voltage and jockeys do not have pockets. There are very few options and none of them are fool proof for a jockey trying to hide a machine. For a jockey to get from the jock's room, walk through the crowd on the most crowded day at the Saratoga meet, likely signing some kids' autographs on the way to the paddock, then shaking hands, meeting your connections in the paddock, then out to the track to ride your race, after the race, un-saddling, back through the crowd and to the jocks room, with the prongs still containing live voltage would be the greatest trick of all time. The risk of it presenting itself or for something to go wrong is too great; the best machine riders that ever lived, even the great magician David Copperfield, would not try such a stunt on a day like that. The risk Saez would have taken using a machine that, had he been caught, would have banned him for life from ever riding in New York and likely at any other track in America again, and would be to risk throwing his entire career away.

Another important fact about a jockey carrying a machine is that it compromises your ability to ride. Even some of the greatest machine riders would not attempt to switch sticks back in the day. Imagine playing a game of tennis, swinging a tennis racquet and trying to hold a machine with live voltage in your hand at the same time. When you throw a machine into the equation of race riding, your ability to ride--using our hands, driving and pushing forward, using your whip and reins, swinging your whip and switching it from one hand to another--all while guiding 1000 pounds of race horse, is severely compromised.

I felt Saez rode a masterful race and should be credited for such. It's highly unlikely that Saez was carrying a machine, and if he was, he would be the first to be able to do so that effectively. Carrying a machine does not allow you to ride with such form and style. He was driving on this horse as they hit the far turn, going to the whip both right-handed and left. How could he have done this? Why did he not just use only the machine if it works so well? And if he were carrying one, why wait so long and so late in the race to use it? A machine is not something you can reach down and just pull out of your pocket; it has to be in your hand before you leave the gates.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, why do we assume machines make horses run faster? I am no scientist, but a whip "stings," a feeling that resonates throughout the body for more than a few seconds. An electrical shock "stuns" the nervous system, basically paralyzing and shutting down the nervous system and muscle controls as fast as you can say zap. When a police officer has to taser someone, they drop to the ground paralyzed from the voltage--they don't run faster.

The mentality that a jockey using a machine can make a horse run faster than a jockey using their arms, voice and whip is way overrated and out of proportion. Saez showed great athletic ability driving Will Take Charge to victory. Let's give credit to the horse and jockey for this win, not a couple of triple A batteries. It's time to put this to rest.