



# op/ed

by jerry brown

## AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

In comments in the *TDN* this week, both Dr. Larry Bramlage and Arthur Hancock took the position that Lasix needs to be banned because bettors want that to happen, and handle will suffer if we don't ([click here](#)). Those gentlemen are certainly qualified to comment as professionals about veterinary medicine and breeding, but when it comes to bettors and handle, they are playing in my ballpark. My handle is seven figures a year, and I produce high end handicapping data used by hundreds of big bettors, including some who bet more than I do. And that idea isn't just untrue, it's dangerously wrong. Dr. Bramlage says "the general public doesn't understand" Lasix. I don't know whether families picnicking at Saratoga understand Lasix or not, but I do know those people don't drive handle. Alan Gutterman once estimated that 2% of those betting are responsible for 50% of handle, and my guess is that 10% of us generate close to 90%. We are not passive "fans"--we are horseplayers, participants in the industry. And I can tell you for a fact that we make it our business to understand Lasix as it applies to handicapping, and that not a single horseplayer I have talked to will bet MORE if Lasix is banned. It would add an extra unhandicappable variable to each horse in every race, and more confusion. Some of us--like me--would bet less.

People bet when they have an opinion. The stronger the opinion, the more likely they are to bet, and the more money they will bet. Things that create uncertainty hinder investment in business, and the same applies here as well. Not knowing whether the reason a horse stopped last time was because he bled, and whether the problem has since been dealt with, creates uncertainty. Factoring in the randomness that someone in the field will bleed today, at a short price, creates uncertainty.

It's worth thinking about why Lasix is the only drug that is listed in the program. And it's worth thinking about how people would pay for and bet on the basis of inside information that would become crucial if Lasix is banned, and how that would affect public perception. It's happening now with illegal drugs, and it has destroyed the morale and enthusiasm of many horseplayers. I see it all the time on the board at my website.

It's also worth thinking about something that happened a few years ago, when the industry went tearing off to build synthetic tracks, without talking to those of us who were going to have to try to answer undecipherable questions about how each individual horse was going to handle each surface, and make decisions about betting those races (or not).

Is everyone happy about how that worked out?

There are two major problems with the drug debate that is currently going on in our industry. The first is that the Lasix issue is being lumped in with the illegal drug issue, because both involve drugs, and in some cases because people have agendas. I've been heavily involved in trying to stop cheating in our game for a long time, not for idealistic reasons, but because money is being stolen from honest horsemen and horseplayers (like yours truly). Attempting to stop something illegal, which everyone agrees about, and attaching it to banning a legal therapeutic drug, which is controversial, is like having a bill to fix the Veterans Administration, and combining it with declaring war on Iran, because both involve the army. As long as it's both or none, movement will be impossible on the non-controversial part, the relatively low hanging fruit.

The second problem is that only two alternatives are being discussed regarding Lasix, and that's a false choice. It's not simply they all get to run on it, or none do. So here's a rational, pragmatic proposal to deal with Lasix. Not as a sports issue, but as a business issue--because this is a business first, and a sport second. If you don't think so, try it without bettors.

First of all, starting with next year's 2-year-old crop, we go back to the way it used to be--to get on Lasix a horse has to be certified as a bleeder by a state vet, not your own vet, following a race or work.

Second, any horse who goes on Lasix has to carry a five-pound penalty. From what work I've been able to do on this with very little data that looks about right, but after a year there will be lots of data, and the penalty can be tinkered with. Third, older horses currently on Lasix have the option of staying on it--and accepting the five-pound penalty.

The idea is to allow the horses that really need medicine to get it, and to remove the incentive for others to use it. Best guess is this will drastically reduce the number of horses on Lasix over time, and enable us to concentrate on real problems, like the fact that nasal strip info is not being provided to the betting public, which is ridiculous. And oh yeah, the minor problem we have with illegal drugs--which is killing our industry.

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