



op/ed

by Dan Liebman

THE PRICE OF RELEVANCE

Reading that Keeneland had again expressed interest in hosting the Breeders' Cup, the idea for a column was born. The angle would be that Keeneland could host the Breeders' Cup--if the track tore out its Polytrack surface.

Before the column could even be penned came the announcement Keeneland was indeed replacing its synthetic surface with a return to dirt by the time of the fall meet.

And though track officials claim it is not being done solely in an attempt to lure the Breeders' Cup, it certainly appears to have been a factor in their thinking.

More to the point of why Keeneland would replace the surface--tearing out a product it once felt so strongly about it invested in the company that manufactured it--is relevance. Keeneland no longer feels as relevant as it once did.

Its three-week meets are perfectly placed for horse to prep for the Kentucky Oaks and Kentucky Derby in the spring and Breeders' Cup races in the fall.

But that is not happening.

Many trainers are avoiding Keeneland's races, not wanting to prep for a race on dirt with a start on a synthetic surface.

The track's marquee race for 3-year-old colts, the Blue Grass S., was once one of the most important final preps for the Derby. That is no longer the case.

No winner of the Blue Grass has won the Derby since Strike the Gold in 1991, though Street Sense ran second in 2007--the first spring meeting with a Polytrack surface--before winning the Derby three weeks later.

In the years since the track converted to Polytrack, two horses who ran in the Blue Grass have run third in the Derby, Paddy O'Prado in 2010 and Dullahan in 2012.

When Keeneland installed Polytrack, first on its training track, then on its main track, it was done for one reason and one reason only--safety.

Now, though Polytrack has proven to reduce fatal injuries to horses, Keeneland has made the decision to return to a dirt surface.

The same month Keeneland began racing on Polytrack (October 2006), the Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit was held.

Held at Keeneland, by the way.

From that meeting, The Jockey Club underwrote the costs of developing the Equine Injury Database, which from 2008-2012 analyzed 1,532,418 starts from about

90 racetracks in North America. The rate of fatal injuries, from 1,000 starts, was 2.00 for 2009, 1.88 for 2010, 1.88 for 2011 and 1.92 for 2012.

Just Monday the latest statistics were released, showing a rate of 1.90 for 2013. Keeneland's rate last year was 0.33.

Not exactly great timing for Keeneland officials to announce they are returning to dirt.

Keeneland officials, of course, are still interested in track safety and proclaim they will do everything they can to make the new dirt track as safe as it can be.

Those are nice sentiments, but time will tell if relevance is more important than safety. Hopefully more horses will not be lost to fatal injuries to again reach that relevant status.