

**[Draft: Steven Crist]**

Thank you, Stuart, and thank you Alan, for inviting me to speak today, and for recognizing the often unheard voices of racing's customers.

My assignment for today was to report to you on how Thoroughbred racing's medication issues are *perceived* by our fans. Keep that word "perceived" in mind. There's a huge difference between perception and reality, and in fact that difference is crucial to this issue. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When I received this assignment back in June, I decided to make this an exercise in participatory journalism. It seemed that the best way to find out how our customers perceive medication issues might simply be to ask them. So I posed the same question put to me by the Jockey Club to the readers of my blog on drf.com, which attracts about 30,000 unique visitors a month. I did not ask them any specific questions or attempt to frame the debate. I simply told them I needed their help to write this speech and asked them how they perceived medication issues in Thoroughbred racing.

The response was astounding -- in its volume, in its tone and in its content. I'll share a few thoughts on each.

The sheer size of the response was unexpected and overwhelming. On a busy week, we might receive a dozen letters to the editor at the racing form. A typical blog entry might attract 25 responses. But on this topic, I knew we were seeing something profoundly different when I received 200 responses in the first three days. Our blogging software only accepts 100 comments per topic, so I actually had to repost my initial inquiry six times to accommodate what turned into 550 responses in less than a month.

As for tone, I can't emphasize strongly enough that these were not the complaints of horseplayers who had just lost a photo. They were, for the most part, lengthy and thoughtful responses. There was more sadness than anger, more frustration than complaint. Dozens if not hundreds of responses began along the lines of , "I love racing and think it's the greatest game ever invented but..."

But where they went from there surprised even me.

Comment after comment repeated the same themes:

\*Drugs in racing are out of control; the inmates are running the asylum;

\*There must be swifter, harsher justice, and more punitive penalties -- zero tolerance, three strikes and you're out of the game.

\*Punish the owners.

\* Suspend the horses.

These, ladies and gentlemen, are our fans' perception of what racing needs to do about medication. And please keep in mind that while these may sound like the demands of an angry vigilante lynch mob, these are in fact the sentiments of some of your most loyal and most thoughtful customers.

I felt their pain at what they think has happened to their game, but I also felt that it was time for a reality check. And after the first 400 comments, one presented itself. On July 16, the Texas Racing Commission ordered a six-month suspension of the nation's leading trainer because of a positive finding for a topical anesthetic in the winner of a maiden race a year earlier. Without belaboring the details of the case, this penalty was ordered despite the absence of any plausible veterinary scenario in which this drug had been administered, and of a finding so infinitesimally small that no one credibly could argue it had had any pharmacological effect on the horse's performance.

I asked the respondents who had already posted comments, without agreeing or disagreeing with them, if what they really wanted was what they had been suggesting. Assuming the suspension – which is under appeal – were sustained: Did they really want the trainer to be thrown out of the game? Did they really want all of his horses removed from their stalls and turned over to outside trainers rather than his assistants? Should all of the owners he trains for also be sanctioned? Should the hundreds of horses who have run under his name this year be barred from competition? Should Rachel Alexandra not be permitted to race again this year?

As it turned out, no one really wanted to answer those questions. Only a few even tried. And after another week, the discussion simply petered out. The message board is still open, but no one has posted a word since July 29.

Since then, I have been trying to digest and interpret the strange turn that this exercise took as it neared its end. And here is what I think.

Our fans are convinced that there is something rotten in the state of racing, but more than anything else they are completely confused about what is really going on – and so are almost all of us who work in the industry or represent it. We make virtually no distinction between therapeutic medications that have a proper and even humane role in the treatment of these animals, and the abusive use of serious drugs. We make no distinction between marginal overages of medicine and the deliberate use of nefarious chemicals. And thus we have a seemingly constant barrage of news about failed drug tests and repeat offenders -- yet absolutely no one seems able to distinguish between minor administrative matters and serious crimes, between overzealous regulation and evidence of truly criminal activity.

Of course we have a problem with drugs in racing. We probably always have, and perhaps we always will. But we're not going about rooting it out the right way. And in failing to do so, we're both worsening the perception, and failing to address the reality, of the problem.

It has been tempting in the past for racing to throw up its hands over this issue and act like a helpless victim. We're good at saying that we don't have the money, or the authority of a league office, to effect real change. Sometimes we get so disheartened that we start going down the cowardly and dangerous road of throwing up our hands and saying, "Let's invite the Federal Government to take this whole thing over," which strikes me as a prescription for disaster.

I personally don't believe we need to go down that road. I think we can do a lot better on our own. And occasionally we do. The industrywide ban on anabolic steroids may have happened for all the wrong reasons – a coincidence of language involving a serious problem in baseball that may not have been that serious a problem in horse racing. But it was something that had to be done because there was simply no way, in a frenzied atmosphere about steroids and sports, that we could defend injecting horses with steroids if we ever wanted to create another new fan. But whatever the reasons, it worked. The industry decided it had to happen, and it did. It was done quickly and accepted quickly. Not one of my respondents even mentioned steroids as a problem. The steroid ban may have been cosmetic, but it can and should be a model for our getting equally serious about other abuses and other drugs.

I will leave you with a final thought: Despite doping scandals in baseball and cycling that may well be even more pervasive than our own, baseball stadiums are doing brisk business and Europeans still line the streets for the Tour de France. After spending years in denial, officials of both of those sports eventually came clean and said something simple and straightforward that racing's leaders need to say:

**We have a problem with medication, and we're going to do something about it.**

While it may be a tough road from there to reality, it's past time for racing to make that simple statement – and I guarantee you that it would be a giant first step in changing the perceptions of our fans and bettors, without whom we will have no sport at all.

Thank you for your time and your attention.