

OPINIONS VIEWPOINT

MARK SIMON



Racing must control the discussion

On the topic of drugs, racing needs to be proactive to assure its fans the sport is clean

RACING SHOULD borrow a page from "Mad Men." As poor a job as the sport collectively has done in promoting itself, maybe a cheap way to get some ideas is to borrow a few tips from the award-winning television show on AMC. This thought comes to mind after hearing some of the discussions at the Jockey Club Round Table Conference on Matters Pertaining to Racing in Saratoga Springs, New York, on August 23.

At that meeting on a sleepy Sunday morning, a lot of discussion centered on drugs, both legal and illegal, and how the sport deals with the issue. This topic has plagued racing like a chronic case of pneumonia for decades, and racing has been unable to shake free of it despite numerous efforts, mostly tied to committees that attempt to address the issue through recommendations that never are adopted nationally.

The issue is both reality and perception, as eloquently stated by *Daily Racing Form* Publisher Steve Crist in his presentation at the conference.

"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 with drugs and medication," Crist said. "... 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 unnecessary drugs. ... We end up a seemingly constant barrage of news about failed drug tests and repeat offenders and a system that doesn't work."

That same evening, an episode of "Mad Men" dealt in part with the efforts to build a new Madison Square Garden at the site of the ornate, Beaux-Arts structure of Penn Station. The developer was looking for an agency to help him overcome the strong objections of an outraged public to plans to demolish the building. Don Draper, the main protagonist and creative director for the fictional Sterling Cooper ad agency, tells the potential client, "If you don't like what is being said, change the discussion."

Penn Station was ultimately demolished, but that has nothing to do with "Mad Men" or Don Draper. "Mad Men" is fictional. Thoroughbred racing's problems are not.

What is pertinent is the notion that racing does not control the discussion on a number of important issues, especially the critical issue of medication. Or is it drugs? Or is it legal medications? Or is it illegal medications? No one knows, because the sport just lumps them all together. And the sport has failed

to address the issue as far as the public is concerned.

For racing to control the discussion, it needs to distinguish between people cheating and people using therapeutic medications where thresholds are set high enough that meaningless positives are not called. According to keynote speaker Louis Romanet, the improvement of drug testing in the last 30 years has resulted in a one-million-fold increase in sensitivity in screening. Tests now detect levels of medications that have absolutely no bearing on performance but appear to the general public to be a case of someone cheating.

To control the discussion, racing must adopt national guidelines on therapeutic medications that clearly delineate between performance-aiding and harmless traces.

For all other illegal drugs, racing must proclaim from a national office that racing is vigorously testing horses daily, is the most regulated of all sports, and has more drug testing performed on its athletes than any other sport. And racing must state that it is clean. It must tell the public that any and all persons caught cheating will be banned from the sport, adopting a three strikes and you're out rule. Racing has a problem; racing addressed the problem;

racing cleaned up the problem; racing no longer has a problem.

Racing needs to take the advice of Don Draper: Control the discussion, or the discussion will control you. ☉

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