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At Breeders' Cup, a Volatile Mix of Speed and Drugs

By **JOE DRAPE**

LOUISVILLE, Ky.

You cannot hold a Breeders' Cup, a series of championship races for the world's best horses, without the issue of medications and illegal drugs coming up. John Gosden is among many European trainers who are critical of how permissive and harmful American medication rules are for horses.

Yet one of his Breeders' Cup Turf contenders, Debussy, will run on the diuretic Lasix, which is banned just about everywhere outside the United States on race days. Of the more than 20 European horses, all but 4 will use the drug, including Goldikova, who is favored to win the Mile for a third consecutive time. It is rare for American horses not to use the drug in a race.

If they do not use Lasix, European trainers say, they are giving their American competitors a clear advantage. Numbers suggest there is, indeed, a culture in American horse racing that ultimately rewards those who seek any means, legal and otherwise, to gain an edge. The California-based trainer Doug O'Neill, for example, is saddling one of the entrants in the Juvenile Turf Sprint on Saturday.

Twice this year, his horses exceeded the threshold level for total carbon dioxide in a postrace test, which indicates a horse may have been given a concoction of baking soda, sugar and electrolytes known as a milkshake. It is administered by shoving a tube down a horse's throat and is intended to help the animal ward off fatigue. O'Neill was suspended and fined in one instance and is awaiting a hearing on the other.

But O'Neill is hardly a stranger to medication violations. He averages one per every 807 starts by his horses, according to records compiled from the Association of Racing Commissioners International and entered in a database.

O'Neill is not the worst offender among those saddling horses at Churchill Downs on Friday and Saturday for the 14 Cup races, which have purses worth a total of \$26 million. Richard

Dutrow Jr., who has horses in six races, averaged a medication violation every 343 starts. John Sadler, who has horses in four races, including Tell a Kelly in the Juvenile Fillies, was cited for a medication violation every 478 starts, according to the data base.

In fact, of the top 20 trainers in the United States by purses won, only two — Christophe Clement and Graham Motion — have never been cited for a medication violation. The American thoroughbred industry knows it has a drug problem, and it is beginning to raise some standards to address it.

“While the development and enforcement of drug rules routinely and correctly fall under the purview of state racing commissions alone, the Jockey Club believes that there is no place in this sport for anyone who repeatedly violates drug rules,” said James L. Gagliano, president and chief operating officer of the Jockey Club. “Bettors are the lifeblood of our sport. They expect and deserve an honest game.”

Breeders' Cup organizers have been a catalyst for change in recent years. Out-of-competition testing for blood-doping agents and other prohibited substances was introduced in Kentucky this year for the first time to meet Breeders' Cup standards. Next year, trainers will be banned from the Breeders' Cup if they have violated a regulation prohibiting the possession or use of a Class I substance, like cobra venom, in any jurisdiction in the 12 months before the championships.

“This is a priority for us,” the Breeders' Cup president, Greg Avioli, said. “To call our event a true world championship, we have to take all measures available to us to ensure a level playing field.”

A Jockey Club study released last March determined that racehorses died at the rate of 2.04 per 1,000 starts in the United States and Canada, a rate twice as deadly as in any other country. The Jockey Club has pointed to multiple studies that show permissive drug rules are part of the cause of the high mortality rates. It has gotten the Association of Racing Commissioners International, or R.C.I., to lower the allowable level of phenylbutazone, which can be used to mask injuries to horses.

In addition, many veterinarians are calling for the elimination of corticosteroids, which can be injected into joints days before a race and help get sore horses to the starting gate.

While those efforts make their way through the bureaucracy of racing commissions in individual states, there is a simpler, quicker and, perhaps, more effective way to get horsemen to quit abusing medications and using illegal drugs. Make public a database of their violations and punishments.

Create a new statistic: Starts per medication violation.

“Transparency and accessibility to rulings would further ensure the integrity of our sport,” the Jockey Club’s Gagliano said. “The Jockey Club has built and maintained several databases and would be glad to collaborate with the R.C.I. to build and maintain a comprehensive and searchable database of already publicly disclosed rulings.”