



**Tuesday, December 10, 2019**

**Continuing the Quest for the Safest Racing Surface:  
Taking Another Look at Synthetic Surfaces**

**Moderator:**

**Steve Byk:** Host, At the Races with Steve Byk, SiriusXM

**Speakers:**

**Michael Dickinson:** President, Tapeta

**Irwin Driedger:** Former Director of Thoroughbred Racing Surfaces, Woodbine

**Mr. Steve Byk:** ...passion to help improve the entire industry when it comes to the racing surface quotient.

We've also got Irwin Driedger with us from Woodbine.

Michael is gonna show a series of slides and hit on some points, and we'll get Irwin's input as to how the various elements have been put to successful implementation at Woodbine.

Let me turn it over to the one and only Michael Dickinson.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Have we any slides?

This morning, we had Mattress Mack.

We're at the other end of the scale now. Just remember, I'm just a farm boy from Maryland.

**[Laughter]**

There we go. That's my first slide. That's my favorite slide, and that's my passion for the horse. He mentioned about turning horses out.

These two horses, two days before this, fought out in a graded stake.

One won, and the other was third, and they battled like mad.

They were fierce competitors on the racetrack, but two days later, they're turned out in the field, and they're best of friends. That's just a really moving photo. We have 250 acres for turnout paddocks, and it's really pleasing.

The favorite time of my day is going in the mornings or the afternoons and seeing the horses out. I talk to them. I don't think they talk back. That's that.

The revolution against dirt has already started, but some of you haven't recognized it yet.

Those are fairly damning statistics there from Sid Fernando, that turf has gone up from 5 percent to 48 percent.

There's a quote there from Martin Panza. Martin is a brilliant world-class racing official with a track record of innovation. Yes, I'm not in favor of dirt, but I've got my lawyer's hat on and just calling witnesses who are like-minded.

This is the chairman of the graded stakes committee saying he's having trouble with his graded stakes on the dirt 'cause there aren't enough runners.

This is Bobby Frankel.

This is another witness I'm calling. He hated even galloping on sloppy tracks, and he was just jogging them because eventually, they get you.

Is this movement pro-turf or anti-dirt? I'll let you decide that.

What's wrong with dirt?

Do you think Santa Anita was the first dirt track to have a load of calamities? Unfortunately not. It's happened to almost every track in America from time to time.

Irwin didn't want me to go bashing dirt because it might upset people, but I'm not blaming the people. The track supers are brilliant. I know most of them. They work really hard. They're conscientious. They don't sleep at night. They work whenever they have to, and they're brilliant, so I'm not knocking people.

I'm not knocking the racetracks because they were handed — they inherited it when they took over the racetracks something that's been there for 100 years, but it's passed its sell-by date.

I'm knocking dirt, but I'm not knocking the people.

It got there.

Yes.

The one reason in red, more than anything else, the public can't stand — because they have a shed-load of drugs and a load of fatalities, two things which the public will not put.

Right, we talk all the time about more science for dirt. They've had it for 100 years. How much longer? Do they want another 100 years? It's been well-researched by lots of people.

We know all about sand, silt, and clay. It's been researched by racing people and also people in other industries, so I don't think we're gonna catch any miracle cure. The moisture, Mick impressed onto us and always has done about how critical it is to have the moisture in dirt tracks, but it's still — and he's having gadgets to try and make that happen, but it still won't eliminate sloppy tracks when it rains.

We've been testing surfaces for 40 years. On the left is a whole load of laboratories, just a few of them, by the way, who have been regularly testing surfaces, and those are some of the people.

Joe King in New York did lots of tests. He was a scientist. It's nothing new for testing, but it hasn't got us quite where we want to be.

Now we move to Tapeta. On the left is Tapeta. I developed the first Tapeta track. It took me four years and 53 different samples, and they were quite good.

We did Presque Isle, Golden Gate, and Devonport. Those were our first three tracks, and those were mine. We have a training track at Al Quoz, and Fair Hill is the best training center in America, and they have one of my tracks. Then my wife came along and said, "I can do better," as wives do. I said,

"You better know more about sand, fibers, wax, and polymers than anyone else." She studied for eight years, did lots of trials and tests. Most tests fail, as you know. After eight years, she came up with Tapeta 10 because it's had 10 improvements from mine. Hers is much better than mine, and we'll see the

statistics later on. Well done to Joan. That's just some of the work she did. We've got a lot more than that. She worked very hard for a long time.

Those are just all-around statistics, jockey club-based, but basically, over five years, turf and synthetic were about the same, and almost half the fatalities of dirt.

This is Woodbine. Less than one there for the first two. This is Presque Isle. We don't have great horses at Presque Isle, but this year, they've done very well. It's even lower than that. I'd like to introduce you to my mentors who taught me about surfaces.

This is Vincent O'Brien, who was champion trainer 20 times. I'm sure you all know him. He trained 100 Grade 1 winners. He developed the first all-weather gallop 45 years ago. I'm sure not many of you know that. There he is.

This is Jeffrey Davidson, who was a world-class turf consultant, used to help me a lot.

These boys. Look at that horse. He's going 32 miles an hour. Isn't that a fantastic jump? Those are two horses there, and they're flying.

As a steeplechase rider, I was always trying to get a length in the air at some of the jumps. Sometimes, they would jump very well for me 'cause I had good horses, but other times, they wouldn't jump as well.

I'd come back and tell my father, they didn't jump nearly as well today. When that happened, we used to walk the course afterwards. You learn more walking a track after than you do before.

We'd go around, and it was nearly always the footing. Now, these horses ran, most of them, until they were 10 or 11. They're six, seven, eight seasons. To do that, they've got to have a little bit art of survival.

When the footing's not as good, they pop in, they go close, they don't jump at fluently, but they get around safely. When the footing's really good, they fly like that.

They taught me about footing. That's the chair at entry. That's five-foot-six high. You can't jump like that unless you've got good footing. Some people think I'm a bit nuts. Not many. Just a few. Just a little bit. I won't argue with them.

I was a steeplechase rider for 11 years. I had 1,600 rides. I didn't have many falls because I was on good horses, but I did have a few. That's me on the ground there, by the way.

I've got an excuse for being a little bit nuts, but what's your excuse? Right.

Last March, I received a phone call from two people in New Mexico out of the blue. I never heard of them before.

It was a businessman — he introduced himself as a businessman and a part-time horse trainer. He said he can fix all the dirt tracks.

He's gonna use science, innovation, and magic ingredients. I said, "Good luck." I tried to produce a safer dirt track 30 years ago, I tried 20 years ago, and I tried 10 years ago.

These are some of the people that helped me to try to create a better dirt track, and I wasn't even close. I told him that, but he wouldn't have any — he wouldn't really listen, but he kept calling.

Eventually, he called back and he said, "No, Michael, you're right." His idea came from people whose grip on the real world is tenuous, to say the least. They charged in, with all the subtlety of a Panzer division, produced a whole load of figures, which were impossible to interpret.

It reminded me of the statistician who drowned in a river whose average depth was two feet. I informed him that you don't need a crystal ball if you can read a history book.

Where do we go now?

What's wrong with synthetics?

I'm sure you've all heard that.

That gets slung at us, all the synthetic people. We're going to tackle them all one by one. The other thing is, oh, they get other types of injuries. They might not get broken legs, but they get other types of injuries.

Now I've got my lawyer's hat on, and I'm just calling witnesses. Here's John Gosden, sends his best horses seven hours in a van just to break the maiden. That's three Grade 1 winners.

That's Enable, that won the Arc. I'm sure you know her. Stradivarius won Ascot Gold Cup. He sends his best horse.

That's a long way to break a maiden for a relatively small pot, so he's obviously not worried about injuries on synthetics. Now we have another very well-known trainer. Can we speak to him? Can you come up to the mike, Mark?

**Mr. Mark Casse:** I'd love to.

**Me. Michael Dickinson:** Yes.

I'm sure you know him.

Just so you know, he did win two parts of the Triple Crown this year.

**Mr. Mark Casse:** On dirt. Yes. Both of them. Both of them, spent a lot of time training over the synthetic track.

To me, I think — I don't have the exact numbers in front of me, but I would dare to say that nobody in the world has run more horses on synthetic and dirt than myself.

Interesting, Michael. I had never heard Bobby Frankel about the bows, the bow tendons, but I can tell you this.

I often read about how there's more soft tissue injuries on synthetic track. I'm not gonna say a bad word, so I'm just gonna say baloney.

I can tell you, this year, I've had eight horses bow. I just had one bow last week, behind, in fact, which was something very new.

You have to remember now, I train probably equally — equal amount of horses on synthetic and dirt. Of those eight horses, six of them were on dirt. Two were on synthetic.

I hear all the time about more hind-end entries. Again, poop. It's not true. It's just not true. It amazes me.

Then I sit there, and I see we need studies for this. We need studies for that. I've done 40 years of studies. I wake up every morning and study, and there's no comparison.

That is on a good day. If you get a bad day, the synthetic is superior. I have a little saying. I think if we put a group of third graders together, gave them the

scenario, I think they sometimes would come up with better answers.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Thank you very much, Mark. Thank you.

That's just a quote from Bill Casner.

This is more witnesses. All right. This horse. He was a European champion two-year-old. There were lots of turf races. This was, I think, in June.

He opened his winning there and broke his maiden on the Tapeta. Now, he must have hurt himself because he won his next four, including two Grade 1s. Injuries there.

This was interesting. The grade one futurity was going to be run on Doncaster on the turf, and there were gonna be five runners in it, but they brought the race back on Tapeta six days later, and there was 11 runners.

We outdid the turf 50 percent. It was won by a good horse and Ballydoyle ran four in it. You can see their colors. They were second, third, and fourth.

This is Mark Johnson, the most winningest trainer ever for 200 years in British racing.

He trains on Tapeta, so he — he's got some good grass gaps as well, but anyhow, they don't — he doesn't have many injuries.

This is Graham Motion, Breeders' Cup winner this year, was trained on Tapeta. We're a little bit worried, the left-hand column there, about overusing the turf tracks. We all love turf, but if you overuse them, they become as dangerous as anything. Some of them are being — what happens now is, the accountant at the racetrack says, oh, we like turf racing. There's more runners, and they bet more.

You get a call down to the racing secretary, more turf. That's all well and good until the turf track is so beat up, and that's what we just worry about at the moment.

**Mr. Mark Casse:** Michael, can I say one more thing?

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Yes. Of course you can.

**Mr. Mark Casse:** There's so much being said and brought upon with Lasix. We scope every horse we raise and every horse we run.

I can run and raise 20 horses in one day on synthetic. We scope them. Not one iota of blood in those 20 horses.

If I do those same 20 horses on dirt, those 20 horses, 10 of them will bleed through Lasix of some significance. I think that's also important to think about as we go forward because it does appear that, at some point in time, we aren't going to have Lasix, and synthetic also helps with that. Sitting there, I wanted to get that point across 'cause I have — happen to have those studies as well.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** That's very interesting. You're in the field, and that counts.

This is Chip from Turfway. He's fed up of hearing about all these horses that were meant to have bow tendons on synthetics. They did a survey, and all the horses that didn't run back within three weeks, he investigated them all, and there was very few, hardly any bow tendons at all.

That's the end of my witnesses for injuries. Now we go to breakover. Is Mick Peterson still here?

Mick? You're here.

Sorry about this. I'm gonna take you on.

**[Laughter]**

All due respect. Some people prefer dirt because of the breakover. Our research into breakover is entirely different to yours.

In 10 years' time, we'll discover who's right.

There we are.

What do they mean by breakover? Is it the speed the horse's foot comes off the ground? That's what a lot of people think it is.

Is it less slide? What part of breakover do we want to change?

How does it change when a horse goes from a half and 45 to a half and 49? Once you finished a breakover to build up, do you build it to suit a 10,000 claimer or a grade one winner?

When was the last time you heard a trainer say, "Oh, he's a good horse 'cause he's got the breakover." Have you heard him say, "He's a bad horse 'cause he's got the wrong breakover."

You haven't really heard that. We think some of them — sorry, Mick. Never mind. The breakover is but a reflection of the moment at which the knee joint releases the energy stored in the elastic tissue of the leg.

I don't want to get into a big match today, Mick, but we'll do — we'll all do more research, and so we'll come back next year.

Right.

Synthetics in the heat. We always get that abuse. This was a track been in Dubai since, I think, '07.

In March and April, it gets hot. Brian Powell will tell you it's okay.

Now, in the summertime, they don't train in the summer, but it gets up to 120, 130 degrees in Dubai in the summer.

It's been down 17 years.

Right.

Tapeta in the heat at Woodbine. Now, Irwin's gonna come in 'cause Toronto is pretty near the Arctic Circle, so we can't claim that it's hot. Irwin, go on. You've got your —

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** I compared the average temperatures in July and August from Woodbine racetrack in Toronto to Santa Anita. ®

There's a three degrees' difference between the two on average between July and August. That's not a hell of a lot.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Now we talk about the Breeders' here. The Breeders', to be honest with you, don't all like synthetics because they've invested millions of dollars in dirt stallions and dirt mares. It's worth reading this. It's rather disturbing at times.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Not to interject and create a point of contention. This is an entirely unfair statement. The problems that were created in the first round of synthetics was the synthetic product itself.

The industry was sold a bill of goods about the low maintenance and the performance year-round and all the things that it was going to do, and in fact, it wasn't — none of that proved out at the time.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** That statement says he's talked to the trainers, and they didn't want the change.

I don't think we want to get into a big —

**Mr. Steve Byk:** You understand my point.

No one's gonna argue that what you've got now is a far superior product to the one that was melting and with the jelly cables and with all the various issues that we — that the industry was confronted upon the introduction of the first round of them, of the products, correct, or am I being unfair?

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** I don't want to move —

**Mr. Steve Byk:** I understand.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Move on to the next one.

**Mr., Irwin Driedger:** You're correct, actually, but synthetic tracks have only been around for 15 years, so they've evolved a lot over that period of time.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Agreed.

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** Dirt has been around for a long, long time. They're still pretty much the same.

When it rains, they still get very wet, and they still get damn sloppy, whereas a synthetic track doesn't need an umbrella over top of it. It pretty much stays the same, and when the races come off the turf, they can run on a decent track.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** A lot of horses can actually stay and run, versus when you have a dirt track, the track is sloppy or it's sealed or it's not consistent.

Everything today that I've witnessed has been about consistency.

If you look at which track is the most consistent, you have to think it's the synthetic track.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** I want to keep my statistics up to date, so these were correct until midnight last night. I couldn't put them on the PowerPoint, but this is from this year.

Woodbine is 1.2. Presque Isle is 0.7. Golden Gate is 0.67. UK is 0.03. I know you all want figures and numbers, and that's it. When the politicians come along and

say, "You've got to make this game safer," and you show them figures like that against the dirt, it's game, set, and match.

The bettors. Right. I'm sure there's got some mutual members here, and we all have to increase the handle. I'd like you to read those.

Walt Glynn from Raceform and the Racing Post, and Barney Curley is a huge gambler.

I'm sure you've heard of him. Big time. He said, "I have no fear for betting on Tapeta." I'll just let you read that in your own time.

Let's face it. They're as important as anybody because they fund the game.

That's our track at Newcastle. It's a straight mile, two miles around. This is slightly out-of-date because yesterday, we had 103 horses due to run at Newcastle.

Unfortunately, four of them were scratched. They didn't make it to the races, so we only had 99 runners. We're now up to over 10,000 with three fatalities.

Our last fatality at Newcastle was a heart attack, and our last fatality at Wolverhampton was actually a horse struck into from behind. It was pilot error rather than the track.

Those numbers speak for themselves. They're impressive. The final statement there. Someone more articulate than me.

Have we got 30 seconds?

For any of you young racing executives, try and get your bosses to get you two days to go racing at the Cheltenham festival.

Yes, it's England.

Yes, it's steeplechasing, but I promise you it's a very well-run racetrack, and you will learn a lot. Whenever we go anywhere, we try to learn all the time. It's a fantastic day's racing.

Look at the betting, the handle there. It's a great atmosphere. Yes, it's a lot different to you guys, but I bet you, if you go over there for a couple of days — Nick Rust, head of the BHA, said he'd show some of you around.

You can have some champagne with me at my desk.

That's the Cheltenham racecourse. I think it's down there. That's where we have lunch. That's where we have tea. This is a racetrack that — the boy there is a quarter pole.

This is St. Moritz. They raced in February three Sundays. If you like champagne, you'll be all right. That's the hospitality. This is the grooming the track.

Any of you who race up in Canada or somewhere, you have no excuse for cancellations now. This is 7,000 feet up. Now, you think that looks dangerous. That is actually the safest part.

The second-worst part is the finish 'cause they can't pull them up. They do a whole circuit until they get them pulled up.

The worst part is the gate because the horses go in the gate, and the guy's behind. Then he's got to get it right, and he has to duck. It's not for the fainthearted.

Then if the next guy puts his ski on yours, you'll go tumbling over. You don't need that. If you thought I was a bit nuts, I'm now going to remove all doubt.

I go running with a Cheshire. I ran 15 miles last Saturday. There's 112 horses and one lunatic there in the white shirt. No prizes for guessing who the lunatic is. There he is, half an hour later, struggling. Three hours later, where's my compass?

I caught them all at the end. I jumped how many? 28 jumps. Now you know I'm nuts. Oh, there I am on the ground. Yes. One of the many times I've landed on my head.

Thank you very much.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Michael, what do you think has to occur at this point? The statistics are obvious to everybody. What I was trying to point out was that there was a negative experience for a number of facilities and some frustration.

Obviously, what happened in California with the mandate from the CHRB to install synthetic surfaces at all four major ovals ended up being a bit of a disaster. Since then, you've really had a consistent message that you're available to improve that experience. You're constantly working, you and your wife, to make the product better. What has to happen from this point to successfully, if not transition to synthetics again, to at least incorporate them as a third surface again?

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** We've all got better. I started my preface by saying, it's coming to the end of dirt. Synthetics will take over. It might not be the breeders who were the main problem last time. It's gonna be the politicians who are gonna

force the change on us.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** The pressure.

Also, from Woodbine's experience, since you've converted your product, your track to Tapeta, talk about the maintenance aspect and the satisfaction aspect for Woodbine as a whole.

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** Woodbine has had a synthetic track for 13 years.

We implemented the first one in 2006. It was a poly track. We changed it over to Tapeta in 2016.

Yes, we've had some issues. Sometimes, they were difficult, but we didn't give up on the actual track. It has improved I don't know how many percent, but it's really, really come around.

I think for a track to survive in this day and age with the catastrophics at the front, at the forefront, synthetics have proven to be safer. They're proven to be more consistent. People definitely need to take a look at them.

If we don't do something, somebody might do — just do it for us. I think what's been going on in California and what was talked about this morning in Aqueduct, they're both incidents where they had a lot of catastrophics. They both seemed to be weather-related.

If there would have been a synthetic track, the rain is not a big deal. It really doesn't matter. You don't have to run around and seal the track if it's getting cloudy or the forecast is for rain. Really, it doesn't matter that much. It makes that track much more consistent than a typical dirt track.

A dirt track can be very, very good. I'm not a knocker of dirt tracks. We have one at Woodbine as well.

It's a mild training track. When the weather is great, there's a lot of people that use it, but when it rains, there's nobody that uses it. It's still open, but just nobody uses it.

To me, that's the icing on the cake. I don't have to really — all you have to do is just go there and take a look, and you'll see for yourself. It's that simple.

**Mr. Mark Casse:** There's one big disadvantage. Trainers never get days off.

**[Laughter]**

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** What did he say?

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** Trainers never get days off.

**Mr. Mark Casse:** We get rain and washed out.

You call, and they say, "We can't train this morning. Take the morning off." It doesn't happen with synthetic. You have to work every day.

I wanted to say one other thing. Hardly anyplace gets hotter than Ocala, Florida, and OBS has a synthetic track, and it's unbelievable.

We have a week in April where they breed somewhere like 1,400 horses over a period of five days, and the average temperature may be 90-plus. It's amazing. As far as temperature, that's another one of my —

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Questions for Michael and Irwin?

Questions about the Da Hoss or Lift Up?

Great year for Lift Up.

Well done.

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Thank you.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** Michael Dickinson —

**Mr. Michael Dickinson:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. Steve Byk:** - Thank you everybody, and Irwin Driedger from Woodbine.

**Mr. Irwin Driedger:** Thank you.