



Director's Chair

by Joe Faraldo, USTA Chairperson of the Board

Follow the Science

A primer on the Harness Racing Medication Collaborative

In my previous Director's Chair column (June 2024), I warned of the dangers of employing "optics"—what looks good—in place of science and disregarding the highly beneficial and necessary use of therapeutic medications. Expounding on this, let me offer a brief history as to why the Harness Racing Medication Collaborative (HRMC) committee was formed, explain its mission, and introduce some of its esteemed and well credentialed members.

Several years ago, the USTA endeavored to establish uniform rules regarding the use of therapeutic medications and consolidate resources with our Thoroughbred brethren in an effort to develop methodologies to determine the presence of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDS). To further these objectives, the USTA sent representatives to the Thoroughbred-centric Racing Medication Testing Consortium (RMTC).

Despite engaging in years of good-faith efforts and providing the RMTC with significant financial support, it became abundantly clear that harness racing and its vastly different performance model were going to be totally ignored. After about seven years of being shunned, the then USTA president and executive vice president abandoned all efforts to interact with the flats' RMTC.

Consider once again: Among our numerous problems with RMTC is its 10-picogram-per-milliliter (10 pg/mL) threshold for betamethasone. That threshold simply doesn't work in Standardbred veterinary practice.

There was a case of a horseman, in a jurisdiction where the RMTC rules on the use of betamethasone were adopted by its racing commission for use in both Thoroughbred and harness racing, in which the veterinarian using the standard vial containing betamethasone inject-

ed both knees and ankles. The trainer's horse raced two weeks in a row and was tagged with two positive tests for betamethasone over the 10 pg/mL threshold. Exceeding the threshold was inevitable based upon customary veterinary practice in the harness racing industry when using this medication. The horseman was basically the subject of a "gotcha."

This example is not atypical as there are other substances commonly used in harness racing that would present similar "gotchas." Could that be tolerated, or should the USTA succumb to the RMTC and abandon our goals?

The USTA would not abandon those goals after leaving the RMTC. USTA president Russell Williams, in an effort to achieve a solution specifically for our breed and its unique performance model, requested input from the undersigned and others. It was suggested that we take a

page from the Thoroughbred playbook and establish our own scientific committee that could address our specific needs for uniform therapeutic medication rules. Thus, in 2018, the HRMC was born.

Upon being appointed the chair of the committee, my first task was to assemble a variety of industry pharmacologists, veterinarians and veteran horse people to serve. This sophisticated group of harness professionals was charged to establish—via science—specific guidelines and threshold levels suitable for the use of therapeutic medications that would satisfy the needs of harness racing's weekly performance model.

Our first protocol was to determine appropriate therapeutic thresholds based upon peer-reviewed scientific literature

and actual drug administration tests rather than choosing "gotcha" levels skewed by optics and criticism from outsiders lacking knowledge and/or true concern for race-horse welfare.

To HRMC's credit, it gathered a top-flight array of veterinarians and pharmacologists highly experienced in drug testing and research. Among the group is Dr. Thomas Tobin, of the Gluck Equine Research Center; Dr. Andy Roberts, a renowned equine veterinarian, dual-breed horse owner and USTA director; Dr. Clara Fenger, a central Kentucky veterinary practitioner specializing in both Thoroughbred and Standardbred racehorses and expert in equine exercise physiology; Dr. Richard Balmer, longtime Meadowlands and Meadows backstretch vet who oversaw

Despite engaging in years of good-faith efforts and providing the RMTC with significant financial support, it became abundantly clear that harness racing and its vastly different performance model were going to be totally ignored.

Hambletonian and Meadowlands Pace winners; Dr. George Maylin, director of the New York State Equine Drug Testing and Research Lab for over five decades; Dr. Kenneth McKeever, professor at Rutgers University's Department of Animal Sciences; and Dr. Jim Robertson, a nationally renowned surgeon based at the Cleveland Equine Clinic.

These professionals immersed themselves in the task, researching learned journals and relying on their own experience in drug administration trials in order to determine appropriate threshold levels suited to harness racing.

Armed with the product of our scientific research and conclusions on betamethasone and other substances, HRMC headed across the country to persuade the Association of Racing Commissioners International (ARCI) to accept our recommendations, present them to the various racing commissions, and implement them for harness racing. After our research presentation, we were once again overridden by RMTC members who sat on ARCI's scientific advisory committee. We were also told to do more research; the irony here is that RMTC's research is subject to a non-disclosure agreement and unavailable for scrutiny.

Frustrated, we regrouped and tried to enter a national racing compact with the Thoroughbreds. Once again, we asked for separate rules, and the Thoroughbred interests—perhaps influenced by the RMTC—refused and killed any deal.

Later, Congress imposed HISA upon the Thoroughbred industry. HISA's scientific advisory committee is headed by the past president of the RMTC. In sum, the RMTC's role presents a quite predicable outcome should HISA ever be imposed upon our industry.

The USTA has since helped introduce the Racehorse Health and Safety Act (RHSA), which embodies that same ill-fated National Compact deal to protect our industry from the disaster which is HISA—its irrelevant concentrations, draconian penalties, and constitutional infirmities.

Examples of the product of HRMC efforts includes the establishment of a 200 pg/mL therapeutic level for beta-methasone, larger than the 10 pg/mL

level which the optics-minded RMTC had set. As recently as July 31, the HRMC met and reviewed additional tentative recommendations regarding a number of medications, such as metformin and gabapentin, to establish “no-effect thresholds” or irrelevant plasma concentrations.

The proposed “no-effect thresholds” of other medications are subject to the peer-review criteria set for any of our recommendations to move forward. Most have met those criteria, but two or three of those considered await peer review from the 11 considered, so we will delay a formal announcement until that standard is met for all 11. The levels for these medications were peer-reviewed, and specific recommendations were reached to correct the ridiculous HISA penalties and clear contamination positives for these widely prescribed human medications.

Obviously, it is a lot more difficult to cull through volumes of peer-reviewed research papers on medications than to simply pull numbers out of thin air, which is basically what the RMTC has done when the only concern is putting optics in place in an attempt to convince the general public that horse racing has the strictest medication controls.

George Morton Levy, often referred to as the “Father of Nighttime Harness Racing,” used to say that most people sometimes “look for the easiest way to do their jobs.” For the HRMC, the opposite is true. We continue to work for fair, scientific “no-effect thresholds” that stay within sensible harness-specific rules.



Joe Faraldo

The views contained in this column are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily represent the opinions or views of the USTA. To comment on this column, email us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.



STARS.ustrotting.com

STANDARD BRED
STARS
STALLION SHOWCASE

STARS is the online listing of participating stallions, powered by the USTA's comprehensive Pathway database.

STARS is an invaluable research tool for breeders, stallion owners, yearling buyers and many others throughout the harness racing industry.

With **STARS**, you can advertise your stallion all year and easily promote his offspring's racing accomplishments during the busy summer season. A search of your listed stallion will provide free Pathway reports and yearling sales results, hypothetical mating reports, photo and a link to your website.

Package your **STARS** listing with an ad in Hoof Beats for big savings.

Contact Heather Cason at 877-800-8782, ext. 3217 or heather.cason@ustrotting.com to list your stallion today.