

Virginia Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association

Safety Whips

During the past year industry groups have focused on issues affecting the welfare and safety of race horses, prompted in part by widely publicized injuries and medical treatment of horses capturing the public eye. The issues include medication, racing surfaces, sales preparation and racing of two year olds, and the use of equipment like toe grabs and whips.

The Jockey Club's Thoroughbred Safety Committee and the Association of Racing Commissioners International Model Rules Committee ("RCI") are playing a prominent role in the process. The National HBPA's Rules Liaison Committee is working closely with both organizations. The Virginia HBPA is also doing so, albeit in a relatively limited way.

Because use by jockeys of the typical American style whip—reed thin and very flexible-- often results in large welts and even cuts on a horse's body the VHBPA sponsored experimental use of a more humane and safer whip design during this past summer's race meet at Colonial Downs.

Before the meet started the VHBPA bought a supply of padded whips ("ProCush") from an Irish manufacturer (Old Mill Whips) that makes them for use by jockeys in England, where they are mandatory. The ProCush whips were given to jockeys at Colonial who began using them in the second week of the meet.

The ProCush whip differs substantially from the standard American version and costs about ten or fifteen dollars more. It is a bit shorter, twenty-seven inches compared to thirty inches. More importantly, the leather flap or "popper" at the end of the shaft is seven inches long and heavily padded unlike the American model which has a narrow unpadded flap of less than half that length. The ProCush shaft itself is thicker and a bit stiffer than the American model, which is rapier thin and very flexible.

By design most of the impact of striking with a ProCush whip is absorbed by the padded flap and the shaft rather than the horse's rump, flank, or other part of its body. The whip does not cause welts or cuts, or otherwise hurt the horse, even though the long padded flap creates a loud popping noise when a horse is struck. That appears to get the horse's attention even though there is little or no sting associated with it.

Response to the ProCush whip by Colonial's jockey colony was largely positive, though at first some riders thought it was too short. That criticism seemed to disappear as the jockeys got accustomed to using it.

Leading jockey Horacio Karamanos used the ProCush exclusively as did others including veteran James Lopez.

National riders like Javier Castellano who came to Colonial this summer to ride on the card featuring the Colonial Turf Cup (Gr. 3) also used the VHBPA supplied ProCush whip. Castellano continued to use it after riding at Colonial as evident in the July 19th *Blood-Horse* cover photo of Castellano aboard *Red Rocks* beating *Curlin* in the Man o' War stakes at Belmont.

Other groups, including jockeys at Delaware Park and Ellis Park, have also experimented with padded whips, similar to the ProCush brand, made by other manufacturers. And for at least the past three years all steeplechase jockeys racing in the United States have used ProCush whips mandated by the National Steeplechase Association. The steeplechase whip is made the same as the flat racing model but has a longer padded flapper.

The purpose of the VHBPA experiment at Colonial Downs, as well as those at other flat tracks, is to lay the foundation for drafting an acceptable uniform whip rule of the sort under consideration by the Jockey Club and the RCI. Both groups are currently working on a draft that specifies padded construction like that used in the ProCush whip. Existing rules in many racing jurisdictions like Virginia simply state that a whip can be no longer than thirty inches and weigh no more than one pound. There are no requirements or specifications for padding.

Closely related to construction of the whip is concern over the frequency of its use during a race. The current rule in Virginia prohibits excessive whip use by a jockey but leaves the stewards to judge on an individual basis what constitutes excessive use. That determination usually, though not always, turns on post race evidence of welts or cuts on a horse.

Here, too, the Jockey Club Safety Committee has recommended following the English practice of defining excessive use with more specificity. Under English rules jockeys are limited to a certain number of strikes with a whip when riding for the wire and may not hit their mount with an arm raised above shoulder height.

A proposed uniform rule from the RCI, based on the above experiments and recommendations from the various industry groups, is expected by the end of the year. Failing that the Virginia Racing Commission will likely consider changing its rule to incorporate use of a padded safety whip based on our experience this summer at Colonial Downs.