



The dirt racing issue with contributions from Secretariat and Go For Wand



Sand racing: Statistics tell an interesting story. (Pic per illustration)

IN recent issues of the [Turf Talk Newsletter](#), the banning of “sand racing” has been mooted, and a written question was received asking if sand training should also be banned, in the belief that training around the world is on sand with grass gallops before racing. I shall return to the latter point.

Our editor, who raised the matter, made it clear that he was talking about dirt racing as in the USA and at Meydan where dirt replaced Tapeta to bring back American World Cup contestants. He was right to imply that it is all “very American”.

Sand tracks – as for training at (say) Milnerton – are very different surfaces to dirt tracks USA style. Dirt is a mixture of sand and stuff like clay and silt, but not rubberised material, laid on a solid under-surface – hence “Going: Sloppy” when rainwater stays on or near the top.

The USA attraction to dirt lies significantly in traditional adherence to the clock-watching that charac-

terises American racing. Most racing is on flat dirt ovals. Times can be compared whereas in Europe, the only valid comparison is to a “standard” time for that particular course and distance. All racecourses are different to each other in soil, going and topography.

Artificial surfaces were introduced belatedly in USA with a view to reducing the relatively high rate of breakdown. The whole issue had been given emotional momentum by the terrible death of Go for Wand – “terrible” not only for the horror of what befell her, but because it was witnessed by 50,000 people live and millions around America and the world.

Go for Wand was a 3 year old racing heroine whose fame transcended the boundaries of American Racing. The 7xGr1 winning daughter of Deputy Minister won the 1989 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Fillies and was “7 for 8” at 3 going into the 1990 Breeders’ Cup Distaff at Belmont Park. *(to p2)*

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The famous finish between Affirmed and Alydar, Belmont 1978.

DAVID ALLAN (...cont)

The New York track has a long straight with which most international racing fans are familiar through footage of Secretariat's 1973 31 lengths Triple Crown win and of the epic, legendary battle between Affirmed (another Triple Crown Winner) and Alydar in the 1978 renewal during a fabulous season of rivalry.

Belmont has a colossal catchment area. Abutting Queen's, it is a short drive from JFK's runways for Red-Eye fliers from the West Coast losing 3 hours and Transatlantic incomers gaining 5 or 6. In fact, those able to take Concorde from London or Paris would arrive before they left.

By car through the tunnel from Midtown Manhattan or from Westchester County suburbs to the north, expressway access is simple. Belmont has its own ramps.

Go for Wand, battling hard for the lead, crashed down right in front of the grandstand, then rose to

try – horrifyingly - to continue the race on three legs before collapsing again in front of the packed crowd as her trainer Bill Badgett and his wife jumped the rail and raced to cradle their stricken filly. It was a dreadful occurrence with great emotional impact far and wide leaving a memory that still makes me shudder.

The fracture could have occurred for a number of reasons, but the event thrust the horse-racing welfare issue harshly into the faces of a huge American audience. Although the drug rules in New York State were and are stricter than elsewhere, the broad debate on their USA use and on surfaces was raging.

A number of major racetracks converted to kinder artificial surfaces such as Polytrack and ProRide with their polymer/rubberised content. In California, Santa Anita switched to ProRide but later switched back to dirt – as did other tracks for reasons unfathomable to Europeans but comprehensible to some American interests.

A 2014 article in The Guardian quoted some USA figures:

Between 2009 and 2013: 1.22 fatal injuries per 1,000 synthetic starts; 1.63 per 1,000 turf starts; 2.08 per 1,000 dirt starts. At Santa Anita in the last full year of Pro-Ride there were 0.90 fatalities per 1,000 starts. In 2010, on the then newly installed dirt surface, there were 3.45 fatalities per 1,000 starts according to that article.

Of course not all racing fatalities are for musculoskeletal reasons. Cardiac arrest can happen too. It is a complex picture but the significant uniformity in American racing renders broad analysis more meaningful than in the disparate European theatres of action.

It may seem to be a big step backwards, changing back to dirt, but it is not really for a European to judge. European racecourses are exclusively – almost – for racing not training. There are days and weeks between meetings. There may be several thousand racehorses in training in Newmarket alone, but

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Nice steady canter on grass.

they do not train on the two racecourses, rather on their own several thousand acres of manicured, varied gallops and canters that surround the town.

In contrast, nearly two thousand horses may use Santa Anita on a morning with minimal time to help the track to recover if racing on the same day – and for many days within a period before the circus moves elsewhere. Very different.

Now... the question about training on sand (being prevalent around the world). Before coming to South Africa many moons ago, I had never seen training on sand. Not in Europe, nor in Australia, USA, wherever. At the spectacular 10-track Miho Training Centre for over 2,000 horses in Japan, they choose from turf, dirt, woodchips and a polytrack. No sand. Even in little (in a racing sense) Kazakhstan (the 7th biggest country in the world) where (a) we had a 1-2-3-4 in their Oaks equivalent earlier this month Yay! and (b) they run on what I call “Turf without the Grass” i.e. Earth: muddy as the snows melt in May, then dry and dusty.

UK and Irish jaws drop when visiting (say) Milnerton, then marvel at how the trainers turn out such good horses. “*It works for them*” said a baffled but admiring Irish friend.

In his world, they get onto the grass unless frozen or waterlogged for all work, not only soon before racing. A first piece of fast work should ideally be on grass to find something out. If the grass is too firm, polytrack is available and is not so far from Good turf in character, whereas sand would be chalk and cheese. Even so, some trainers and owner/managers are wary of going too quick on polytrack in training with its slightly less certain footing.

With the proliferation of polytracks in Newmarket and other centres, it is true that there is less ordinary day to day cantering on grass than before. Trainers on private gallops –with relatively little traffic – will have sufficient grass alternatives and probably one polytrack or woodchip artificial gallop at home.

Working 1200 metres in deep sand might in some ways be similar to a mile on grass, but the stride pattern will not be. Nothing illustrates this more than the business of buying – as we do – for citizens of ex-Soviet bloc countries who fancy a crack at the 2400 metres President’s Cup in Moscow.

That IS run on deep sand. Finding the right horse is not a matter of trip and ratings, but a particular physical type that can slog through the deep resistance for a mile and a half. - **tt**.



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