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Op/Ed: No More Dirt

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Earle Mack | *Horsphotos*

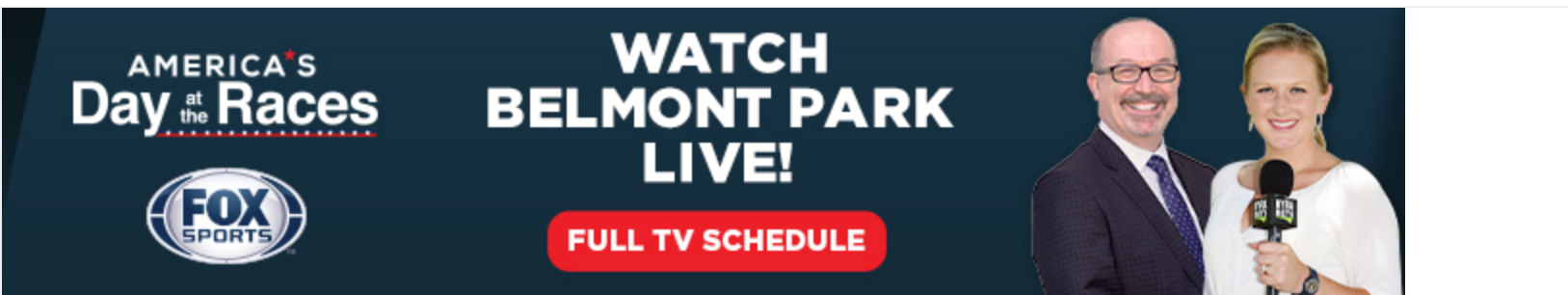
By Earle Mack

In the wake of the tragic deaths of 12 horses at Churchill Downs, the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority (HISA) has called for an emergency summit. This presents both a moment of leadership for HISA and an important test for the independent directors of the Churchill Downs Corporation to protect shareholder interests and ensure the survival of the entire horse racing industry. They must step up and meet the moment or step down. This can be achieved by ending dirt racing in America and transitioning to synthetic surfaces.

These heartbreaking events in recent weeks have forced the horse racing industry to confront a harsh reality. On average, two Thoroughbred horses lose their lives every day on U.S. tracks. If we fail to take decisive action, the Triple Crown and horse racing itself may soon be mourned as relics of the past. Animal rights groups, emboldened by each equine death, are gaining traction in their campaign against horse racing. The calls to ban or severely restrict the sport grow louder with each life lost. We cannot afford to lose this race for the soul and survival of our sport.

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Tradition holds great power in our sport, with our most prestigious races historically being run on dirt tracks. However, the stark and troubling statistics demand a shift in thinking. We must abandon old norms and embrace new practices that prioritize the safety and welfare of our noble equine athletes. The benefits of synthetic tracks are not mere conjecture; they are a proven truth. Their superior safety record and fewer injuries make their adoption not just an option but an ethical imperative.



Skeptics may argue that altering the character of the Triple Crown races would alienate fans. However, declining attendance at Thoroughbred races tells a different story. Fans are turning their backs on a sport they once adored, disheartened by the undeniable fact that their entertainment comes at a deadly price. When other sports have bravely evolved to improve safety and gameplay, we must question why horse racing clings to traditions that increasingly prove deadly.

Certainly, progress has been made. Since 2009, fatal injuries during races have declined by 37.5%. But when we consider that synthetic tracks have been proven to be three times safer than dirt tracks, it becomes glaringly apparent that we have only scratched the surface of what we must achieve. We have solid evidence, compelling data, and a clear path forward. It is time we summon the courage and resolve to embark on this path. Ironically, despite their proven safety record, synthetic tracks are in decline. This is primarily because our marquee Triple Crown events remain steadfastly tied to dirt. The stubborn adherence to tradition in our industry's pinnacle races is a disparity we can no longer afford. Shifting the surface of the Triple Crown to synthetic would be a revolutionary step, igniting an industry-wide transformation and ensuring a safer, fairer field for our equine athletes.

This is where the independent directors of the Churchill Downs Corporation can make a historic difference. Independent directors have played a crucial role in preserving shareholder value and rebuilding consumer trust for some of the world's largest companies.

In 2015, Volkswagen faced a scandal involving emissions test cheating, leading to the resignation of the company's CEO and the appointment of a new board of directors, the majority of whom were independent. The new board took swift action to address the scandal, and Volkswagen is now working to rebuild its reputation.

In 2017, companies such as Uber and The Weinstein Company appointed independent directors to address workplace harassment following a series of scandals in that regard.

In 2018, companies like Equifax and Marriott appointed independent directors to improve their cybersecurity measures after experiencing a series of data breaches.

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Today, the challenges facing both the Churchill Downs Corporation and our industry provide an opportunity for its independent directors to lead by proactively and boldly addressing the crisis of equine safety instead of reacting to a growing regulatory and societal movement to ban the sport.

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That is why I am calling on the independent directors of the Churchill Downs Corporation, Daniel P. Harrington, MBA, CPA, Ulysses Lee Bridgeman Jr., and Robert L. Fealy, CPA, to get on board today and publicly support this change.

The responsibility lies with horse racing's governing bodies, influential race track directors, and all key stakeholders to rally behind a transition to synthetic tracks. Their public endorsement and commitment to safer racing conditions would signal the beginning of the transformative change our industry desperately needs. But Churchill Downs Corporation must lead the way.

Fortunately, we are not without hope. NYRA's Belmont Track, a vital component of the Triple Crown, is already leading by example, planning to install a synthetic track for its 2024 spring meet. This serves as the spark we need to ignite a safety revolution.

Next year marks the historic 150th anniversary of the Triple Crown. This milestone should be more than a nostalgic reflection on the past; it should be a fervent pledge for a safer future. A future where our sport remains a thrilling spectacle but also evolves into a beacon of safety, integrity, and respect for our equine athletes.

The prestigious Triple Crown races—the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness S., and the Belmont S.—now stand on the edge of a daunting, dark abyss. Each life lost serves as a deafening alarm, signaling that change is urgently needed and indeed horse racing as a whole hangs in the balance. We owe it to our equine athletes, our loyal fans, and future generations to ensure that our sport does not crumble into a mournful memory of bygone times.

We stand at the threshold of a monumental shift. Our response to this crisis must be immediate, bold, and unwavering. The clarion call for a race towards a safer future is sounding. Switching surfaces will mean fewer breakdowns and fewer drugs in the sports. Let us answer this call with the courage and determination our horses display every time they take to the track.

This is our defining moment. Let us ensure that the Triple Crown not only continues to sparkle with excitement and glory, but also radiates a renewed commitment to the safety and well-being of our equine companions. The reins of the future of horse racing are in our hands. We must grasp them firmly and steer our sport towards a safer, more responsible era. The heart of horse racing beats in the chest of every horse that runs for us; let us honor them by championing a sport that safeguards their lives.

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