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Let's Get Serious About EPO

It's frequently said that generals are always fighting the last war. That might be the case with erythropoietin – known more informally as EPO. It is a blood enhancer, which stimulates the bone marrow to produce additional red blood cells. The more red blood cells, the greater the horse's ability to carry oxygen. EPO abuse has been suspected for years in track and field, swimming, and cycling. For the past half-decade, it has been suspected in horse racing throughout the world.

There are certain facts that people need to know:

1. EPO does enhance horse performance.
2. EPO is ultimately significantly damaging to horses. The horses develop antibodies to EPO, which lead to anemia and, in some cases, death.
3. A quasi-test has been developed by Cornell-Rutgers, which can find the antibodies to EPO. There is no test available that will confirm these positives.
4. There is a separate test, which has been developed in England that can find EPO. It too uses antibodies. However, it can only find EPO up to 48 hours after administration, which makes this test of extremely limited utility. Also, no tests are available that will confirm these EPO positives.
5. There already is a second generation of EPO drugs for which there are no tests.

There are some beliefs about EPO that are not facts but that I think are worth considering in developing future policy.

1. The people who are using EPO, or who are using the second generation of EPO are major cheats. They are the people who should not be in racing. They are clearly intentionally cheating. They aren't people who gave the wrong drug to the wrong horse on the wrong day. They should be the most heavily punished people in racing.
2. Most of the major cheaters have moved onto the second generation of EPO since they understand that tests are being developed for EPO.
3. Nobody is getting penalized for EPO usage. In the absence of confirmatory tests, no racing commission will go after a trainer for EPO use. Additionally, for the Cornell-Rutgers test, the antibodies are present for at least four months. There is no way to pinpoint who or when the horse was given EPO. You will only get an EPO positive if the veterinarian or trainer is caught in the act of administering EPO.
4. Racing needs to be proactive in its dealing with EPO and its descendants. Racing is losing its war against EPO.

In order to win the next war against the next generation of EPO, there needs to be a new outlook. In the absence of confirmatory test, there is little likelihood of a

successful racing commission prosecution of an EPO case. It might be better if we approached EPO in the same manner that we treat equine infectious anemia (swamp fever). Most states require that a horse in order to be sold or to enter the state have a valid negative Coggins test showing that the horse is free from the disease. This is normally handled under the auspices of the state's agricultural department. If EPO is similarly dangerous to a horse's health, why can't the same concept be applied to EPO?

Accordingly, a suggested first step would be to give anyone who claims a horse the right to have that claimed horse tested for EPO. If the test comes back positive, the claimant would have the right to void the claim.

Depending on the cost and availability of the EPO test, this concept can be applied further to racehorses. If a racing commission laboratory finds that a horse has tested positive for EPO, it ought to have the ability to ban that horse from racing in that state until such time as the horse tests negative for EPO. It ought to be possible to have a regulation in the near future, which would bar a racehorse from even being sold for racing purposes in the absence of a valid, recent negative EPO test. A person selling a horse ought to be forced to disclose any positive EPO tests. Even without a confirmatory test, there are ways that racing can begin to come to grips with its EPO problems.

If a trainer has EPO positives, the racing commission needs to test all the horses in a trainer's barn for EPO. Again, if these horses test positive for EPO, they ought to be banned from racing until such time as they test negative.

Finally, we ought to be freezing samples from these positive tests. These crooks should not have absolute immunity from the rules of racing and criminal laws. When a confirmatory test is ultimately developed, these trainers should be suspended – perhaps prosecuted – to the full extent of the law.

It has been reported that when Texas found positive tests for EPO antibodies, all the Texas Racing Commission did was notify the owner of the affected horse. This doesn't cut the mustard. The health of the horse and the integrity of the horse racing industry are at stake. When we develop tests for the second generation of EPO, mailing a letter to the horse's owner should not be enough. Even if commissions can't take action against a trainer's license, there are some proactive ways to deter EPO use in horse racing. We need to take action to ban those horses with positive EPO tests from being raced or sold.