

# STRAIGHT TALKING

by Mark



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## World Cup absence of Americans is their loss

**I**T is a great pity that there were no American horses in this year's Dubai World Cup. They are a great racing nation and any top international race would be enhanced by their presence. But the suggestion that they could be attracted back by a switch from the synthetic, Tapeta, track to a US-style, 'dirt' surface is almost certainly flawed.

Of course, it is correct that synthetic surfaces have, for the most part, had a cool reception in the United States and many, if not most, trainers clearly prefer 'dirt'. But their reasoning usually doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Suggestions that 'dirt' is safer than synthetics is plainly untrue. A majority of US horses have been bred to run on 'dirt' and we now know that there are very significant differences between 'dirt' surfaces and synthetics, with it quite possibly being the case that horses bred to race on turf are more suited to the synthetic surface than those who were bred to race on 'dirt'.

But even for those that were born and bred to race on that surface, 'dirt' will have a higher attrition rate than either turf or synthetics and, to date, it seems that a large majority of owners and trainers in the United

States are unwilling to contemplate racing their horses on their own tracks without the aid of drugs. The rest of the racing world, including Dubai, are now, slowly but surely, adopting zero tolerance policies to the drugs which are commonplace in US racing, and therein lies the crux of the matter.

It is also clear that American horses had a tremendous record in Dubai on the old Nad al Sheba sand surface with eight of the first 14 World Cups, which were all run on that surface, going to US horses. Even in those days the diuretic Lasix, which these horses all apparently needed in their home country, was banned in Dubai and they did perfectly well without it.

Since the switch to Tapeta, only one of the five World Cups has gone to the US but I still have to query whether a switch back to sand would attract them back and whether, even if it did, it would be good for world racing or the long-term future of the Dubai World Cup.

Times they are a changing and regulations on drug use are tightening everywhere in the world except in the United States. Tests for drugs such as anabolic steroids are also advancing rapidly and it is likely that these drugs will be detectable months after admin-

istration. If the US insists on maintaining its current drug policy it is certainly going to be left out in the cold and it is questionable whether the popularity of US-breds will be maintained outside their own borders.

**C**onversely, if the US decides to come, even partially, in line with international racing drug policies, I have to wonder if 'dirt' will continue to be their preferred surface. I don't know for sure but I suspect that, without regular use of anti-inflammatories and other painkillers, US trainers might come to understand the benefits of synthetic surfaces.

I well remember the late Michael Osborne, when he was Chairman of the Dubai World Cup committee, telling me that he thought the race might one day be run on turf and reminding me that 80% of the world's Group 1 races were run on turf. Maybe his prediction will come true and maybe it won't but, unless it does, a synthetic surface is probably the safest alternative and the nearest thing to a half-way house.

If the Americans don't like it, to my mind, it is their loss. This year's renewal was a fantastic race and the winner collected £3,614,457.83.

## It sure ain't rocket science, just simple physics

**L**AST month I expressed my disappointment that my comments on the lack of 'bounce' in Polytrack had failed to provoke some debate and this month Jean Robinson of the Hot To Trot Racing Club has come to the rescue with an interesting and thought-provoking letter in Kickback.

Jean expresses surprise that no data is available from simple tests on compression, deformation, impact resistance, hardness, bounce factor, coefficient of friction, etc. for synthetic racing surfaces, and I share her concerns.

She suggests a very simple test with

a golf ball and a tennis ball on turf and Polytrack and I carried this out although, in our case, the synthetic surface was Tapeta. The result was pretty much as expected, although I was quite amazed at how high the golf ball bounced on grass.

Neither ball bounced at all on the synthetic surface, which clearly demonstrates the energy absorbing properties of that material, but the experiment does not actually tell us that there is any energy return from the turf as, in this case, there is a huge potential for energy return from the ball itself. It is designed specifically for that purpose and, of

course, the elastic properties would be best demonstrated if we bounced the ball on a solid surface such as concrete.

I, therefore, conducted a cruder experiment with a heavy stone and was pleasantly surprised to find that there was a bounce of a few inches on what I would have described as good-firm turf. Again, there was no movement on the sand-based surface and had I had some soft turf available I would have expected a similar result.

None of this is rocket science but it is very simple physics and it further highlights the flaws in Nick Mordin's

hypothesis on the matter.

Jean Robinson also raised the issue of increased soft tissue injuries and 'hind end strain' on synthetic tracks but I think, if it is correct that some trainers are removing shoes to reduce this, then they are barking up the wrong tree.

The increase in soft tissue issues is most likely to be as a result of increased slide on the sand surface and this effect is well demonstrated on US dirt surfaces where the addition of toe-grabs reduces such injuries but greatly increases the risk of concussion injuries such as long bone fractures.



**DEIRDRE** and I have been lucky to visit Dubai for all but two World Cups and we have always had a wonderful time, but this year's visit was unique in that we were specifically invited by Falcon, a company formed by Sheikh Mohammed to promote Dubai as 'a place of opportunity for business, culture and lifestyle'.

This meant that, for a change, we spent quite a bit of time with people whose link with Dubai had nothing whatsoever to do with horseracing and we had the opportunity to see the country from a different perspective.

We were particularly taken by our visit to the Sheikh Mohammed Centre

for Cultural Understanding where we enjoyed a highly entertaining informal lunch and discussion about Emirati culture hosted by semi-retired Emirati businessman Nasif Kayed.

This was followed by a walking tour of the Al Fahidi Historic District, including a visit to a mosque (with Deirdre appropriately attired), during which the open, very frank, and often humorous discussions about the difference in our cultures continued.

It is a fantastic project and I would thoroughly recommend all visitors to Dubai to take in a tour of the centre. In fact, it should be compulsory for all budding terrorists, warmongers, and heads of state from around the world. It was a lesson in mutual understanding.

## A wonderful night that washed away the doubts

**I**HAVE to admit that, as I entered Meydan for this year's Dubai World Cup, I was wondering whether I could conjure up my usual enthusiasm for the racing. There was no doubting the quality of the card but it was sad that there were no ex-MJR inmates and our host Sheikh Mohammed's Godolphin team didn't seem to have anything like the same strength and depth as in previous years.

Like many I also had a slight nagging doubt that our host himself might not be enjoying it quite as much as he has done in the past and that the pressures of the last year might have taken a toll on his enthusiasm. But, if you saw him dancing on the podium after the Dubai World Cup, you now know as I do that those fears were unfounded.

The night built into a great one with some wonderful races and prizes spread around the world, as they should be in a truly international competition.

I was disappointed by Cavalryman's defeat, as we have his old mother Silversword visiting Cape Cross at Kildangan, and I did think that Silvestre had some grounds for his objection against the winner, but I couldn't begrudge the connections of Certerach their success when the result was upheld.

I was delighted to see the Jamie Osborne-trained Toast Of New York run away with the UAE Derby. It has to be

said that this was a boost for British All-Weather racing – the Wolverhampton surface obviously didn't do him any harm on his last two starts – and I was quick to check that I hadn't had anything finish close behind him which might now attract fresh interest from the handicapper.

Japanese racing has impressed me immensely since I visited Tokyo twice to run Fruits of Love in the Japan Cup and I was delighted to see two Group Ones, the Dubai Duty Free and the Sheema Classic, going to Japan. Their enthusiasm for international competition is second to none and they thoroughly deserve all the success that they get. A win for Japan in the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe cannot be far away and, in the meantime, I was thrilled to see them collect some of the spoils in Dubai.

And so, after wins for South Africa, Ireland, the UK, Hong Kong and Japan – with a multitude of different nationalities represented among owners, trainers and jockeys – we came to the big one and the last chance for the home team to triumph. And triumph they did, with an emphatic victory for African Story under none other than Silvestre de Sousa.

It was great to watch the race and even better to see Sheikh Mohammed, Silvestre and Saeed bin Suroor enjoying themselves so openly on the podium afterwards.