

WETHERBY EQUINE FATALITIES REPORT

1. Background

The British Horseracing Authority has concluded its review into the high number of equine fatalities – 4 – which occurred at Wetherby racecourse's fixture on 14th October 2009. This was the course's first fixture of their 2009/10 season.

2. Evidence Requested

2.1 The Authority's Racecourse Department took written evidence from:

- its Senior Veterinary Adviser, Anthony Stirk (who reviewed all camera angles of all four incidents);
- its Senior and Northern Inspectors of Courses, Richard Linley and Chris Dennis;
- the raceday Stipendiary Stewards;
- the Wetherby Chief Executive and Clerk of the Course, Jonjo Sanderson.

2.2 In addition, the Authority commissioned a leading firm of sports turf agronomists, Professional Sportsturf Design to visit the course subsequent to the fixture, with a brief to assess the condition and profile of the track, report on current maintenance procedures, and recommend any potential improvements.

2.3 The Racecourse Department itself reviewed the career profiles of the four fatally injured horses as well as Going Stick data supplied by the racecourse.

2.4 Finally, the Authority has also proactively held discussions with the RSPCA (whose Equine Consultant was present at the fixture), National Trainers Federation (NTF) and Professional Jockeys Association (PJA) to obtain their feedback and observations on the four fatalities and Wetherby's racing surface.

3. Findings

3.1 The four fatally injured horses were MISS GIBBOA (IRE), NUT HAND (IRE), DIVEX (IRE) and MARREL (GB).

- The first two named horses died in hurdle races; the latter two in steeplechases;
- MISS GIBBOA and NUT HAND were three year old juvenile hurdlers having their third and second runs respectively over hurdles. Neither had a record of any previous on-course injury during their careers and both had run within the last eight weeks. The former fell at the second last hurdle and fractured a foreleg; The latter finished 3rd in its race but ruptured a foreleg tendon and was euthanised. Both horses were ridden by Professional jockeys;
- MARREL was an experienced 11 year old chaser with 86 previous career runs. The horse had been running frequently since Mid June 2009 (including two wins)

after nearly a year off and this was its first career fall. The horse fractured its hind pastern, probably on take-off, and was euthanised;

- DIVEX was an experienced eight year old chaser with 33 previous career runs, include two wins, two falls and two unseats. The horse has been running at monthly intervals since April 2009. DIVEX stumbled very badly on landing, was immediately pulled up having fractured its left knee, and euthanised. Both MARREL and DIVEX were ridden by Conditional jockeys;
- All four horses were trained by different trainers.

3.2 The Authority's Inspectorate was in attendance on the 14th October raceday and revisited the next morning to review all aspects of the course. Senior Inspector of Courses, Richard Linley, reported:

- The going on the day of racing was as reported (Good to Firm), with the marginally quickest area being in the home straight. The degree of firmness was not dissimilar to other courses that had been inspected by the Authority during the same period and this was endorsed by jockey and trainer feedback obtained on the raceday. The raceday Going Stick reading of 9.4 also backs up the official Going description;
- The cover of grass was excellent;
- He walked the course three times during the fixture and there was no indication of any common factor in respect of the fatal injuries;
- There were no complaints from trainers or jockeys during the raceday that the track was unsafe;
- Routine irrigation should continue as necessary for future early season fixtures and ongoing vertidrainning work should also be carried out.

3.3 The report submitted by the Wetherby Chief Executive highlighted the close season track maintenance work that had been carried out.

3.3.1 This included:

- Reduction in grass height to 50mm;
- Scarification of debris from the base of the sward to encourage growth;
- Regular compaction relief using four different types of equipment and varying depths;
- Top dressing (840 tonnes) of localised areas of the surface to a depth of ½ inch;
- Three applications of fertiliser as advised by their turf consultant;
- Two applications of slurry on localised area;
- Application of granular wetting agent;
- Installation of extra drainage in four areas to prevent localised standing water;
- Rebuilding of three jump fences in line with usual renewal strategy;
- Widening of fences in home straight to spread wear on the racing surface.

3.3.2 In addition, the following procedures were carried out by Wetherby in the immediate run-up to the 14th October fixture:

- Maintaining grass length at racing height using front mounted tractor mower;
- Regular irrigation of entire course using boom irrigators – completed 13th October;
- Spiking of the entire course – with particular emphasis on the take-offs and landing zones;

These processes represent good sports turf management practices in line with the Authority's General Instruction 3.2., which racecourses must adhere to.

3.4 Professional Sportsturf Design (PSD), a leading agronomy consultant, visited Wetherby racecourse at the request of the Authority. PSD noted:

- there was 100% grass sward cover to the surface;
- there were clear benefits as a result of the close season top dressing and the compaction relief works;
- the improving root depth;
- that the Summer maintenance regime implemented in the close season was an excellent programme of works;
- that the course "looked in extremely good condition".

3.5 From post 14th October discussions between the Authority and NTF/PJA it was clear that neither representative organisation believed Wetherby racecourse to be in any way inherently unsafe and there was no suggestion that e.g. racing should be suspended at the venue, or that the maximum field sizes (safety factors) should be reduced. Neither has the RSPCA's Equine Consultant suggested any cessation of racing at Wetherby.

4. **Conclusion**

4.1 Having considered all the reports and findings highlighted in Sections 2 and 3 above, the Authority has been unable to identify any clear, common factor(s) to account for the four equine fatalities at Wetherby on 14th October 2009.

4.2 Consequently, and taking all specialists and participant feedback into account – as well as its own internal expertise – it concludes that there is no fundamental reason why racing should not continue as scheduled at Wetherby racecourse.

4.3 However, in line with Racing's commitment to minimise risk wherever possible, the following actions are now being taken forward by Wetherby and the Authority:

- Ongoing pre-fixture inspections by the Authority's Inspectorate ahead of forthcoming race meetings;
- Continued course irrigation and decompaction work as necessary to produce as "easy" (soft) a surface as possible;
- Continued spiking of fence take offs and landings before every fixture;



- Further course applications of organic amendments;
- Continued movement of hurdles and running rail to provide fresh ground;
- The use of “false wings” at fences in order to spread wear and provide enhanced take offs and landings;
- Further analysis of Wetherby’s racing programme content to ensure distances and conditions of entry for each race are suitable for the standard of horses running at Wetherby.