

TDNQA

This week, the owner of The Meadowlands, Jeff Gural, announced that he had been conducting out-of-competition testing for cobalt, which is believed to act as an EPO-like endurance booster. As a result of his testing, he banned two trainers from racing at his three Standardbred tracks, which also include Vernon Downs and Tioga. The bans were the latest of several Gural has handed down at his tracks to people he thought were a detriment to his business. In doing so, he has become somewhat of a folk hero to participants in racing in both breeds who are frustrated with the pace of catching and rooting out those who would look to take an illegal advantage. Gural's newly renovated Meadowlands has opened to rave reviews, and business is booming. The TDN's Sue Finley caught up with Gural, who has become racing's poster boy for the concept of "house rules."



Jeff Gural at his New Meadowlands Racetrack. Is business up because bettors believe in the integrity of the product?

Lisa photo

TDN: I think there's a frustration level in Thoroughbred racing that getting people thrown out of the sport is a close-to-impossible process. You seem to have solved this problem.

JG: I solved it by hiring my own investigator. I also make everyone who races at my tracks sign an agreement that allows me to do out-of-competition testing, so essentially, my investigator can show up at any time at the tracks or on the farm.

TDN: There was some pushback on that initially.

JG: We resolved that. I think that (owners and trainers) overreacted and we made it clear that we were going to come during the day, we weren't go to show up at 4:00 in the morning and demand a sample. There was one farm that said I couldn't come. I said 'Okay, anyone training there couldn't race at my track.' We had a meeting and agreed on some common-sense rules. We would check in at the gate. We would not take blood from the horse without asking the trainer to have his own vet there. I think they realized fairly quickly that this wasn't a witch hunt.

TDN: You've become the champion of 'house rules.' Explain to me how you interpret the concept.

JG: The most important thing for us is the out-of-competition testing and the fact that we're allowed to do it and they know we are and they've agreed to it in advance, so I don't have to worry to that someone is going to say, 'I don't have to do that.' In all honesty, I look at it this way: I didn't spend \$100 million to build a racetrack so that dishonest people could make a living racing there.

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TDN: What do you spend annually on integrity issues?

JG: It's probably costing us \$150,000 per year between the investigator, the out-of-competition testing, and some other things. Believe it or not, we have an advantage because if you went to the State Police and said, 'We want you to go and investigate something,' they would need to have probable cause. We don't need to. We're private and our racetrack is private property. If someone pulled onto the grounds in a truck and trailer, we can say, 'We're here to inspect it.' If you were the State Police, they'd have to have a reason to do so; someone sent them a tip and said they saw hypodermic needles or something. I don't have a problem with that. That's the Constitution. Lucky the Constitution also says it's private property you're racing on and I can do that.

Having said that, I would think most racetracks don't want to spend any money on it and I do, because I own horses, breed horses and it comes back to the fact that I didn't spend \$100 million to bail out the harness racing industry so dishonest people could make money. I also think it helps my business to show my customers that I'm making every effort to have a level playing field.

TDN: Do you think it helps you financially?

JG: Our handle has been good; I can't say it's been good because of that. We've seen our handle go up. But it's a moral issue for me. I'm a very honest person. If I shake your hand, that's how I do business. If someone

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came along and wanted to buy a horse from me, and I shook on it, and someone else came along and offered me more, I wouldn't sell it. I despise dishonesty. I think it has hurt the business tremendously. It's good for business to root these guys out, but it's more of a moral issue to me. I despise dishonest people. That's why I've done it.

TDN: I've heard a lot of people say they wish they could get away with it. Why can't they?

JG: I think that typically, state agencies have a budget and having 20 lawsuits floating around is probably not good for the guy who runs the agency. You're constantly reading stories about how overtime in some agency is through the roof. They have to explain that. I don't want to accuse anyone, but the nature of the beast is that there are people out there who are going to hire lawyers and drag this out for years. I have the advantage of the private property ruling. The one person who sued me lost. Had they won, this could be a different situation. The reason they lost was that I worked with my attorney to present the case, not only from a legal standpoint, but from a logical standpoint. With most judges, a lot of it is their gut feeling. When a trainer's winning percentage all of a sudden triples, and you make the judge aware of that, it helps the case, because common sense would say here's a guy who used to win 10% of the time, and now he wins 30% of the time. How did that happen? I worked hand in hand with my attorney in that case to make the best argument we could.

TDN: Do you feel confident you're able to catch people using cobalt?

JG: The cobalt is tricky because it's so hard to detect. We've been lucky a couple of times, which is why I wanted to put that statement out Wednesday ([click here](#)). They're taking their chances that if I happen to show up at the wrong time, it will be the end of their career at The Meadowlands. I'm sure the two major positive tests that blew the box were pure luck in that we happened to show up at the right time. We show up on Sundays when no one is expecting anyone to show up. My guess is that the normal inspectors at other tracks are told not to work overtime. Brice Cote (the investigator) who works for me is really determined to catch these guys.

The reason I came out with a statement on cobalt is that it's so hard to detect, so I wanted to make it clear that I am trying to catch you, so the people who are using it and saying 'I know I don't have to worry because they don't test for it in Pennsylvania or New York,' well, now they test for it in Hong Kong because I'm sending the samples. Rather than catch people, I'll discourage people from doing it.

TDN: In employing house rules, you often have the responsibility of being judge and jury. Is that difficult?

JG: It's definitely hard to be judge and jury. That's why we don't just guess. We had other high readings for cobalt from other trainers, but they weren't high enough for me to take action. I didn't feel comfortable because at the time, there wasn't enough information available. Now I think there's more and there's going to be more in the next few months, where veterinarians and labs will try to establish a level where it would be impossible for a horse to show such a high level of cobalt, because while it does occur naturally, it is on a very, very low level. Besides being performance-enhancing, it's toxic. So they're killing the horse. I remember people saying they were wondering why people were using thyroxine.

Well, probably the only reason people are using thyroxine is they give it so they don't kill the horses. It's very frustrating. So hopefully, people will be embarrassed that I'm doing it and they're not.

TDN: Do you ever look at Thoroughbred racing and wonder why nobody is following your lead?

JG: I don't know anything about Thoroughbred racing. As far as harness racing goes, I would say I'm surprised. I've gotten a call from two track owners in the last three years asking for help. Those were the only calls I've gotten. No one else calls to ask if I've uncovered anything or I know anything about a particular trainer.

TDN: Are you frequently threatened with legal action?

JG: No. No. I think the reason I don't get sued is, unlike the old days, there are other places you can go race. I intentionally do not identify the people by name. I don't go out of my way to hurt anybody. All I care is they don't race at my track. I'm not on a crusade to deprive someone of a livelihood. I'm protecting my interests. I don't notify the authorities, I don't notify other racetracks. Same with the vets. I don't go to the medical licensing board. I just say you can't race at my tracks.

TDN: Any advice for people who would follow your lead?

JG: If they really care, they're probably better off doing what I've done and hiring a private company to try to catch the guys. There are advantages that I have that the government doesn't have, like I said. We don't need a court order to open the trunk of your truck. We don't have a problem showing up on a Sunday if that's when you're least likely to expect us.