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EPO cheaters can now be nailed

Stan

BERGSTEIN



TUCSON, Ariz. – The \$1 million Haskell and and \$1.5 million Hambletonian and the 70,000 people who turned out to see them, along with Marylou Whitney's return from a stroke for her namesake race at Saratoga, grabbed racing headlines over the weekend.

The attention was deserved, but the longterm significance was overshadowed by a development far more important for the world of horse racing.

There now is a test for EPO – the drug itself, not just for antibodies created by it – and it has already produced results. Word of the new test came from Dr. Larry Soma, the veteran and highly regarded equine research director at the New Bolton Center of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

The test was developed by the Pennsylvania Equine Toxicology and Research Laboratory, a Pennsylvania Department of

Agriculture facility in West Chester, Pa., which collaborates with New Bolton and Soma. The PETRL, as the toxicology laboratory is known, has been financially supported for years by Pennsylvania's Thoroughbred and harness racing commissions and contributions from state horsemen's associations.

The support has paid off, big. The PETRL has become the first laboratory to directly confirm the presence in horses of erythropoietin (EPO) and darbepoetin alfa – substances that increase the production of red blood cells. According to people on the backstretch, EPO has become the drug of choice because it is difficult to detect and is believed to increase aerobic function and endurance.

Soma and toxicology lab director Dr. Cornelius Uboh started working on the test a few years ago, concentrating on oxyglobin, a simpler protein-based substance than EPO. Their ultimate goal was to isolate the EPO protein.

"We first were able to extract the protein from plasma though the work of a team led by Dr. Eric Birks," Soma said. "Then Dr. Fuyu Guan, who works closely with Dr. Uboh, was able to develop a brand new method of breaking apart the protein of the human EPO molecules into

smaller fractions called peptides, thus allowing positive identification of the EPO itself, using very sensitive liquid chromatographic tandem mass spectrometry technology. Dr. Guan has been working on EPO and darbepoetin alfa and conducting experiments with research horses that have been administered EPO, and he was able to use that information as a model.

"We have optimized the method, and today we are able to make the positive EPO-darbepoetin alfa identification, not just the presence of antibodies that may be produced in the horse by the administration of human EPO to horses," Soma said.

Asked if he thought the test would stand up against court challenges, Dr. Uboh answered quickly. "No doubt," he said. "They can send these tests anywhere in the world for verification."

So the scientists have caught up with the crooks.

The first example came in Ontario, where the pacesetter Ontario Racing Commission, hearing of the West Chester research, asked if it could send samples there for verification of its own positive tests for EPO. That in itself was significant in a fraternity that at times zealously guards territorial imperatives. The West

Chester tests confirmed what Ontario had found, and Ontario quickly suspended trainer Todd Gray and is recommending a 10-year suspension and \$100,000 fine. A journeyman trainer until two years ago, Gray rose in the ranks with the pacer Rair Earth, a winner of \$1.3 million and one of three Gray horses that tested positive for EPO.

The willingness of the Ontario commission and laboratory to send samples to a laboratory outside their normal testing protocol, and bear the considerable price of the sophisticated new testing, is an example of how racing can keep up with drugs that are expensive and difficult to detect.

So is the support from Thoroughbred and harness horsemen and the racing commissions in Pennsylvania for the West Chester testing program.

Unfortunately, it is not the end of the trail. The cheaters will not stop because of the latest discovery. They are likely, however, to stop using EPO, the scourge of the sport in recent months.

Horse racing in North America owes Drs. Soma, Uboh, Birks, Guan, and their team, a profound vote of thanks. Our industry is already better off for their efforts.

Adding a touch of sweet to a bitter season

Continued from page 1

Showing Up might be, and he can cement that classification Saturday on Arlington Million Day. Showing Up, the Jacksons, and trainer Barclay Tagg are coming back to the Midwest for the first time since May, and Showing Up will try to continue his ascension in the Grade 1 Secretariat Stakes.

In accomplishment, Showing Up has not entered Barbaro's realm, but the Derby is the only blemish on a five-start career, and Showing Up probably has not hit his ceiling.

"I think he's a top-notch horse," said Jackson. "The fact that he's done it, like Barbaro, on the dirt and the grass, I think he's got a lot of ability."

Showing Up showed so much ability early in his late-starting career that Tagg began pondering a Kentucky Derby run after Showing Up had made only two starts, winning his career debut and an entry-level allowance race during the Gulfstream Park meet. Tagg, of course, knows first-hand what kind of horse that requires, having won the 2003 Derby with Funny Cide. But he has also had horses who might have gone to the Derby and been worse for it, such as the high-class Roo Art, whom Tagg trained in the mid-1980's.

"The people who owned Roo Art wanted to go to the Derby, and I didn't want to at all," Tagg said last week from Saratoga. "I fought kicking and screaming not to take him there. This horse, I just thought this was a big, efficient horse who was the perfect one."

What may have derailed Showing Up in the Derby – Barbaro beat him by 10 lengths – were early soundness problems that delayed his first race until February. "If we'd have been lucky with him and gotten a few races at 2, I think he'd been a hell of a Triple Crown candidate," Tagg said.

It was Tagg who picked Showing Up out of a 2-year-old in training sale during the spring of 2005: Buying for the Jacksons, who race as Lael Stable, Tagg would have paid \$100,000, but he got Showing Up, a son of the unproven stallion Strategic Mission's first crop, for \$60,000. But while Tagg raced at Saratoga that summer, Showing Up struggled along at Belmont Park.

"He was training, but I wasn't getting anywhere with him," Tagg said. "You know, one step forward, two steps back. He'd come back lame a lot. He'd jog off the track nice, he'd pull up well, and he'd come back sore. You'd go over his feet, his legs, couldn't find anything wrong with him."

Showing Up failed to blossom in the autumn, when Barbaro started winning. But at winter quarters in Florida, Tagg's assistant Robin Smullen came back one day from a routine gallop aboard Showing Up with a noteworthy opinion. "She said, 'Boy, this horse feels like the real thing if you're looking for a mile-and-a-quarter horse,'" Tagg said.

And Tagg – surprising to some – was.

When Funny Cide won the Derby, he came to Churchill just two days before the race, and Tagg avoided the

pre-Derby media crush. Funny Cide went on to win the Preakness and headed to Belmont Park with a good chance to win the Triple Crown. There, the media hordes descended, and by the time the Belmont had passed, Tagg had been labeled by some as a grouch.

"I think I got a bad rap on that," he said.

Tagg, weathered, ultra-practical, and down-to-earth, had been training horses long before the Triple Crown camera crews began pointing at him, and he knew lean years before the fat. While he understood his obligations to the press with Funny Cide, he also knew that his horse came first.

"You can't have a horse getting ready for a race like that with 50,000 cameras poking in his face," Tagg said.

Still, Tagg was more than happy to go through it all again with Showing Up. "You get to a certain age, and you're dying to have a horse go to the Derby," he said.

Showing Up got there, and Smullen was right about the colt's distance ability – but the Derby was not the right race. In fact, Showing Up had a career-changing experience a few weeks after the Derby, when he first set foot on a turf course.

"He kind of hobbles around on the dirt, takes forever to warm up," said Tagg. "But when we took him over to grass for the first time, he just walked right on, walked right off, like 'Where's this been all my life?'"

In the 1 3/16-mile Colonial Turf Cup, Showing Up rated some

15 lengths behind a runaway pacesetter and finished with a powerful run that propelled him to a 3 1/4-length victory. Go Between, who finished third in the Colonial Turf Cup, validated Showing Up's performance three weeks later, when he won the \$1 million Virginia Derby, a race Tagg skipped to give Showing Up more time between starts.

Showing Up had a bruised foot that kept him out of the Wood Memorial in April, and he came out of his win in the Lexington Stakes prior to the Derby with a deep puncture wound. And last week, another scare: Out on the Saratoga grass course, a horse kicked Showing Up in the hind leg, opening a cut that had to be closed with a veterinary clamp.

But Showing Up has healed, and flesh wounds pale in comparison to Barbaro's ordeal. Barbaro is trying to re-grow the hoof that was cut away when laminitis struck his good hind leg last month. The other leg, the one that broke, is still in a cast, bone fused with metal.

"It's been difficult," Roy Jackson said. "It's been a lesson in just taking things one day at a time. It's difficult to see a horse, any horse, in such an unnatural situation. We're pretty positive people, and it's one of those things there's no point feeling sorry for yourselves. You just get on with things."

Having a horse like Showing Up couldn't make a person forget Barbaro, but it could add another twist to an already unfathomable year.