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## Taking a Stride Back: Dirt Track Changes Coming to the Bluegrass (/full-blog/2014/04/taking-stride-back-dirt-track-changes.html)

[Equine \(/full-blog?category=Equine\)](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn1)

By: Eric Finke, Staff Member

Horse racing returns to the Bluegrass as Lexington once again becomes the horse capital of the world.[i] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn1](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn1)) This spring will offer the last meet on the current synthetic track as the President of Keeneland, Bill Thomson, announced last week that “a state of the art dirt track” will once again become the racing surface. [ii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn2](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn2)) Keeneland has long been the final tune-up for many horses that have hopes of running in the Oaks and the Derby at Churchill Downs.[iii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn3](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn3))

In 2006, Keeneland introduced its current synthetic track to increase the safety of horses under the stress of racing on dirt.[iv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn4](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn4)) This safety trend was seen nationwide as the California Horse Racing Board went so far as to require tracks, including the famous Santa Anita Park, to lay down a synthetic surface by 2007.[v] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn5](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn5)) A surface switch proved to be a success based on studies of the Equine Injury Database.[vi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn6](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn6)) As recent as 2013, there were only 0.43 breakdowns per 1000 starts at Keeneland on the synthetic track surface, while the overall breakdown rate across the nation on dirt surfaces was 2.11 per 1000 starts.[vii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn7](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn7)) In the midst of all this change, Churchill Downs continued using a dirt surface, causing many owners to begin bypassing tracks like Keeneland, in favor of dirt.[viii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn8](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn8)) Horse owners that once eyed the Blue Grass Stakes as the premier event for testing the Derby waters have begun to stay away in recent years.[ix] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn9](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn9)) World famous horse trainer Todd Pletcher has refused to run on a synthetic surface with a true frontrunner in his stable, preferring to run on a consistent dirt

surface that would be comparable to what Churchill Downs has to offer.[x] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn10](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn10))

It is not surprising, albeit unfortunate, that courses including Keeneland are now reverting to the original dirt despite statistic proof of synthetic's beneficial health results. Weather conditions in the United States are not as ideal some say, as compared to other continents like Europe where synthetic has been a great success.[xi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn11](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn11)) Expensive maintenance costs of synthetic tracks are cited as a reason to change back to dirt for others.[xii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn12](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn12)) New York Times sports columnist Joe Drape writes about the Keeneland announcement and who it is really serving, "Who's more important: the equine athletes who put on the show, or the commercial breeders and captains of industry who sit on boards and in the box seats? We got the answer, and it's sad." [xiii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn13](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn13)) Contrary to these sentiments surrounding the reversion to dirt, Josh Rubenstein, Vice President of Del Mar Surfside Race Place, said, "We want absolutely the safest surface possible and feel returning to dirt will allow us to do that." [xiv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn14](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn14))

It is no secret that the culmination of the horseracing season, the Breeders Cup, has been held on the dirt tracks of Santa Anita Park and Churchill Downs the last four years straight.[xv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn15](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn15)) Thomason made reference to this unofficial dirt expectation, "It hasn't been laid down as a condition ... but we also know one of the things it does impact is our horsemen who have their horses going through those traditional dirt races coming to the Breeders' Cup." [xvi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edn16](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edn16))

With so much potential being left out of both the starting and ticket gates, Keeneland is presumably under pressure to revert back to a surface that will draw the best competition once again. Avid fans of Keeneland horse racing and sports are left with an unsettling question after these various arguments: Is this most recent change to horse racing being done for the love of the sport, or purely for the love of money?

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[i] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Visit.Les: About Lexington, <http://www.visitlex.com/about/> (<http://www.visitlex.com/about/>), (last visited Apr. 9, 2014).

[ii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Alicia Winca Hughes, Keeneland to replace synthetic racing surface with return to dirt track, Kentucky.com (Apr. 2, 2014), <http://www.kentucky.com/2014/04/02/3174914/keeneland-to-replace-synthetic.html>, (<http://www.kentucky.com/2014/04/02/3174914/keeneland-to-replace-synthetic.html>.)

[iii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Keeneland spring meet offers Derby, Oaks prep, Washington Times (Apr. 3, 2014), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/apr/3/keeneland-spring-meet-offers-derby-oaks-prep/> (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/apr/3/keeneland-spring-meet-offers-derby-oaks-prep/>).

[iv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Natalie Voss, Keeneland's Switch Back to Dirt Track Could Appeal to Breeder's Cup and Derby Contenders, Business Lexington (Apr. 7, 2014), <http://bizlex.com/2014/04/keeneland-switch-back-to-dirt-track-could-appeal-to-breeders-cup-and-derby-contenders/>, (<http://bizlex.com/2014/04/keeneland-switch-back-to-dirt-track-could-appeal-to-breeders-cup-and-derby-contenders/>).

[v] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Hughes, supra note 2.

[vi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Equine Fatality Summary: Keeneland, Equine Injury Database, <http://www.jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid/Keeneland.pdf> (<http://www.jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid/Keeneland.pdf>) (last visited Apr. 9, 2014).

[vii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Supplemental Tables of Equine Injury Database Statistics for Thoroughbreds, The Jockey Club, [http://jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid\\_5\\_year\\_tables.pdf](http://jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid_5_year_tables.pdf) ([http://jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid\\_5\\_year\\_tables.pdf](http://jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eqid_5_year_tables.pdf)) (last visited Apr. 9, 2014).

[viii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Voss, supra note 4.

[ix] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Hughes, supra note 2.

[x] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Don Agris, Up the Backstretch: A back-to-nature movement in racing, The Island Packet (April 3, 2014), <http://www.islandpacket.com/2014/04/03/30392209/up-the-backstretch-a-back-to-nature.html> (<http://www.islandpacket.com/2014/04/03/30392209/up-the-backstretch-a-back-to-nature.html>).

[xi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Voss, supra note 4.

[xii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_ednref](https://www.blogger.com/blogger.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_ednref)) Andrew Beyer, Keeneland reluctantly will be digging the dirt once again, Washington Post (Apr. 9, 2014), [http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-8748871856a_story.html)

[8748871856a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-8748871856a_story.html) ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-8748871856a_story.html)

[8748871856a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/other/sports/keeneland-reluctantly-will-be-digging-the-dirt-once-again/2014/04/09/08dbb3a-bff-11e3-b574-8748871856a_story.html)).

[xiii] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edref](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edref)) Joe Drape, A Track's Shift to Dirt Adds to Horses' Risks, *The New York Times* (Apr. 3, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/sports/in-a-tracks-decision-horses-are-the-losers.html?hpw&ref=sports> (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/sports/in-a-tracks-decision-horses-are-the-losers.html?hpw&ref=sports>).

[xiv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edref](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edref)) Joe Tash, Del Mar Fairgrounds to replace synthetic track with dirt, *Del Mar Times* (Apr. 9, 2014), <http://www.delmarimes.net/2014/04/09/del-mar-fairgrounds-to-replace-synthetic-track-with-dirt/> (<http://www.delmarimes.net/2014/04/09/del-mar-fairgrounds-to-replace-synthetic-track-with-dirt/>).

[xv] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edref](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edref)) Breeder's Cup, <https://www.breederscup.com/history/event-year> (<http://www.breederscup.com/history/event-year/> (last visited Apr. 9, 2014)).

[xvi] ([https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#\\_edref](https://www.blogger.com/blog.g?blogID=8202935745006855383#_edref)) Hughes, *supra* note 2.

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