

INTERNATIONAL

Are steroids banned in Britain? Yes – but very occasionally no



GLOBAL VILLAGE

Nicholas Godfrey looks into the confused state of steroid use in racing

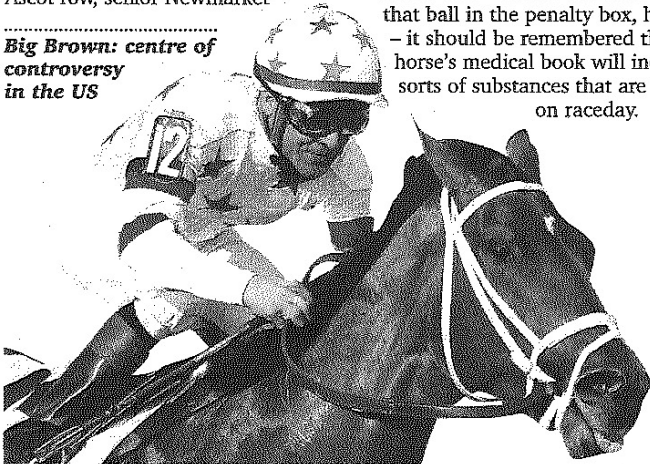
HERE'S a special this week from the hammer-to-crack-a-nut department with regard to the hot topic in the international racing village: anabolic steroids.

Maybe I am a little slow on the uptake, but the rules on this emotive subject seem little short of bewildering. America is coming around to banning them all over the place, yet certain types appear destined to remain legal for "therapeutic" use.

In Australia, steroid usage is now strictly controlled and they can be administered only under a vet's guidance, although Mark Johnston suggests that's not good enough to ensure their horses don't have an unfair advantage when they visit Royal Ascot.

Closer to home, a couple of years ago I was told by the then-BHB that anabolic agents – put simply, those that build muscle mass – were totally banned in Britain. Yet after the Royal Ascot row, senior Newmarket

Big Brown: centre of controversy in the US



vet David Dugdale said they certainly were not totally banned and were actually advisable under certain circumstances.

Confused? Step in Tim Morris, the BHA's director of equine science and welfare, to clarify the issue.

"Unfortunately, there is nothing in life apart from death and taxes that is completely black and white," he suggests.

"They are banned, but if the question is 'can anabolic steroids be used clinically', then the answer is 'yes, absolutely'."

However, this assertion holds true only for out-of-training horses for whom a vet has recommended their usage, rather as a human might be administered steroids to prevent muscle wastage after being knocked down by a bus. After a gelding operation is one circumstance.

"A horse may have a particular injury that needs help," explains Morris. "But in general that horse would not be in training and we are talking about an extremely uncommon occurrence."

Steroids, then, are banned for horses in training, but it is possible their presence may linger and show up in out-of-competition tests, in which case the trainer involved will have questions to answer. "We would then need a context indicator," says Morris. "We want clean training and we need to know why it is there."

If it appears uncomfortably as if we are moving into the murky world of intent here – I didn't mean to handle that ball in the penalty box, honest ref – it should be remembered that a horse's medical book will include all sorts of substances that are banned on raceday.

"The question is whether the steroid has been used unfairly to add to muscle mass, which is illegal," adds Morris. "But, yes, there is a welfare use for vets according to their clinical judgement on out-of-training horses."

So are anabolic steroids totally banned in Britain? The answer is yes, but very occasionally no.

Which is where they are supposed to be in the US under the model rule based on internationally agreed guidelines proposed this year – even before the Big Brown controversy.

California, determined to have a steroid-free Breeders' Cup at Santa Anita, is leading the way among racing states in introducing raceday testing, which started this week.

Although Congress has floated the concept of an umbrella national body to oversee racing, the drive towards uniformity in the States is hampered by individual states' controlling their own legislation.

Europe and Asia are already harmonised on this issue, while Australia has strict controls that are, broadly speaking, akin to Europe.

Even if it is optimistic to imagine a nationwide ban on steroids in the States by the start of 2009, is it too much to hope that global uniformity might not be on its way?

Say it again, Sam

Words heard around the world

"You look at this jerk down here Contessa – how does he set records?"

Motormouth Rick Dutrow launches a tirade against fellow New York trainers on the subject of illegal medication

"I won't lower myself to his level to say something about him"

Gary Contessa attempts to restrain himself from answering Dutrow's accusations

"He should watch The Godfather, and he'll learn about what to say and what not to say"

Now-retired Gasper Moschera, the leading trainer in New York for six straight seasons between 1993 and 1998, has a word for Dutrow as well

"Full marks to Youmzain"

Trainer Richard Gibson pays tribute to a deserved big-race winner after saddling his own warhorse Doctor Dino to finish third in the Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud

California vet bids to spell out the dangers of misuse

MUCH of the evidence about the potential effects of anabolic steroids on horses is only anecdotal at best. They're illegal in Europe, and most Americans don't really like to talk about it.

Be that as it may, Dr Rick Arthur, medical director of the California Horse Racing Board, attempted to spell it out this week in a news release as his state introduced testing.

"Anabolic steroids mimic the male hormone testosterone," said Arthur. "They change the horse both physically and mentally."

"The mental change is the most dramatic. They help horses eat better and withstand the mental stress of

hard training. The horses become more aggressive. Some horses clearly get bigger and stronger.

"Obviously, increased strength and a tougher mental attitude would all be considered positive traits in a racehorse.

"Anabolic steroids allow horses to train harder. Perhaps too hard. Over-training is a significant factor in many of the catastrophic injuries suffered by our horses.

"Therefore, in addition to the performance-enhancing issues, eliminating anabolic steroids could very well have a favourable, long-term impact on the longevity of horses' racing careers."