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Jumpers at more risk as they get older, says report

BLOODSTOCK WORLD

Published: 14/11/2008 (Sport) By Rachel Pagones

RESEARCHERS compiling a database of factors pertaining to racecourse injuries have found significant variations between injuries sustained on turf and all weather surfaces in Flat racing, as well as an increased risk of injury for jumpers carrying more than 12st. However, they have turned up no evidence that birth date has any effect on the risk of injury in two-year-old runners.

These were some of the preliminary conclusions described by Anthony Stirk, senior veterinary advisor to the BHA, while speaking at the Thoroughbred Racing & Breeding Seminar at Cheltenham racecourse yesterday.

Stirk said the information - which included all fatal and nonfatal injuries on every British racecourse from the year 2000 - had yet to be evaluated statistically, so the conclusions remain tentative.

More complex analysis looking at combinations of factors - age combined with race distance, for instance - has yet to be performed.

However, Tim Parkin, an equine epidemiologist formerly with the Animal Health Trust in Newmarket and now at Glasgow University, has submitted an application for a Levy Board grant to analyse the database using statistics, said Stirk, so he was hopeful it would have more practical use in the near future.

The researchers classified two types of injuries - fatal and longterm. The data they gathered showed that bone injuries were by far the most common type of injury in Flat turf racing, particularly when it came to fatal injuries.

Bone injuries were also most commonly involved in fatal breakdowns on all-weather tracks, the data showed.

However, in all-weather racing, in contrast to turf racing, there was quite a noticeable difference, said Stirk.

"Tendon and ligament injuries are the most common type of long-term injury. It's possible all weather surfaces are more fatiguing than turf."

Similarly, more long-term injuries occurred on softer going than on good ground. Yet type of ground did not have any effect on the rate of fatal injuries in Flat turf racing.

Turning to jumps racing, Stirk said carrying bigger weights did not appear to increase the rate of injury for horses carrying less than 12st.

However, when weights go up over 12st, "suddenly there is an increase in injury. I think we should bear this in mind when looking at reducing injuries," he said.

Age is a risk factor in National Hunt horses "in pretty straight gradation as they get older", but on the Flat, there is little variation in injury rates according to age until the age of 11 or 12 - when few of them are still racing.

In terms of youth, however, when the researchers looked at foaling month as a possible factor in two-year-old injuries "there was no correlation," said Stirk.

Other significant risk factors include types of fences in jump races.

While 37 per cent of fatalities in hurdle races were associated with falls at fences, the rate increased to 56 per cent in chases.

The researchers also looked at various types of chase obstacles, and found a lower risk of falling at water jumps, which, however, make up only four per cent of obstacles in jumps racing in this country.

Stirk is now touring all of Britain's racecourses with jumping tracks to examine in detail the type and layout of obstacles in order to better understand how and why horses fall.

The annual seminar is run in association with Cheltenham racecourse, Dodson & Horrel Ltd, Intervet Schering-Plough Animal Health and the Levy Board.

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