

Stallion Retirement Condition Deferred Until 2012

Jeff Gural's vision for improving interest and attendance at harness tracks includes the now well-known provision intended to discourage the retirement of the sport's stars after their three year old season. This would be accomplished by adding a condition excluding the foals of any sire retired at age four (absent a legitimate medical reason) from stakes at Tioga & Vernon Downs and The Meadowlands. While this initiative is still an integral component of the big picture, the decision has been made to defer its enactment until 2012. The first crop affected would be those bred in 2013 and foaled in 2014.

There are several factors that led to the postponement. First, the process to create and review this language takes time and that has become a problem. It is our intention to enter into dialog with the parties directly affected by this condition in the interest of making a clear, concise condition that will be fair to both owners and breeders. We hope to eliminate any loopholes that might be exploited and ultimately avoid having to change the condition after it has been published.

As we endeavored to compose the language in this direction, several of 2011's top three year old horses have been retired. We recognize the absence of any official language on the topic to this point and concede that it would be unfair to those horses to exclude their foals from stakes when there was nothing published that effectively explained the guidelines to the connections as they considered their options.

There also seems to be more than a little confusion as to the scope of the condition. The intention from the beginning has been to exclude the progeny of any horse retired at age four for foals bred during that horse's four year old year ONLY. There would be no exclusion for the foals of ANY horse if the sire was a minimum of five years of age when that foal was bred, regardless of the sire's age of retirement from racing. It is NOT a lifetime ban.

A third consideration, in the interest of continuity, would be to align the Gural tracks with the WEG tracks, which intend to include a version of the stallion retirement condition in their stakes beginning with foals of 2014 (and eventually the Hambletonian Society in 2015).

We recognize and appreciate the support of both of those racing entities.

"It has simply gotten too close to the breeding season. Horses need to be advertised and booked and I understand that," said Gural. "I also want to make it clear that a lifetime ban was never my intention. I do believe wholeheartedly that this needs to be done; look at the difference in the Breeders Cup this year, their viewership was off 70% vs. last year with no Zenyatta."

"I am talking to some of the major circuits about creating four year olds races for big money, which I agree is necessary. There is plenty of money to be made racing older horses and we plan to increase that. If they bring the horse back at four they will have some races against their own type then move on to open older races later in the season. It occurs to me that a horse's reputation would be enhanced greatly by exhibiting the durability and soundness required to compete at age four and beyond...it's also a lot more fun to root for your horse to win a major stake rather than hope to get a mare in foal."

"Hopefully, unlike this past season, next year we'll see some dominant three year olds that will attract the kind of fan base that I believe these horses are capable of attracting."