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## Slots And Safety At N.M. Tracks

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One of the first states to approve slot machine gambling at horse tracks, New Mexico now has been tagged with the worst safety record in racing.

There could be a connection.

The New York Times reported Sunday that five of the six tracks with the highest rates of racing incidents last year were in New Mexico. Only California and New York had more total deaths of horses from racing or training over three years.

Nationwide, the newspaper found an industry “still mired in a culture of drugs and lax regulation and a fatal breakdown rate that remains far worse than in most of the world.”

The Times said the growth of casino gambling at tracks across the country is part of the problem, “resulting in higher purses but also providing an incentive for trainers to race unfit horses.”

In 1997, the Legislature passed and Gov. Gary Johnson signed legislation to give slots to tracks in New Mexico. The industry insisted it would die without the machines.

Gambling on slots began in 1999, and as of July 2011, the machines had generated about \$2.2 billion in house winnings for the tracks, according to the state Gaming Control Board.

Of the money they win on the slots, the tracks have to pay the state 25 percent in gambling taxes and set aside another 20 percent for horse-racing purses.

Horse owners get the biggest share of racing purses, but trainers, breeders and jockeys also share in the pie.

The amount from the machines set aside for purses totaled \$447 million from 1999 to 2011. Purses now total about \$45 million annually, about five times what they were in 1999.

That's plenty incentive to put unfit and doped horses on the track, but it would be a mistake to place all the blame on slots when it comes to industry safety in New Mexico.

There were troubles with horse drugging and other corruption in the industry long before slots were introduced at tracks. A Journal investigation in the mid-1980s found that stimulants and other drugs used to "hop" horses were readily available at tracks.

Here are some other factors that may be at work when it comes to track safety in New Mexico:

- ◆ Slots are now the tail that wag the horse, accounting for most of the revenue at tracks and turning racing into a side business.
- ◆ Track owners and horse owners and trainers wield considerable political influence in Santa Fe when it comes to regulation of the industry.
- ◆ Regulators and the industry have a cozy relationship. Three of the five members of the Racing Commission are required by law to be horse breeders.

Gov. Susana Martinez has asked the Racing Commission for a report on racing's most serious problems in New Mexico and potential solutions to the problems.

Vince Mares, executive director of the commission, says the agency needs more money to improve drug testing.

According to the University of Arizona's Race Track Industry Program, the percentage of slot money that New Mexico sets aside for racing purses is among the highest – if not the highest – in the nation.

A few years back, there was talk of reducing that percentage. Maybe the time has come to do that and redirect some of the money to improve racing safety, including the use of more drug testing.