

# Task Force Switches Focus to Finding Ways to Assist Injured Jockeys

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ROSLYN, N.Y. - A state task force assigned to examine health and safety issues for New York jockeys discussed focusing more on how to assist riders who are injured and/or disabled as opposed to simply providing blanket health insurance coverage, a topic that has created tension within certain factions of the industry.

The New York Task Force on Jockey Health and Safety held its third meeting on Thursday, but it actually could have been the first as members talked about taking a step back to re-evaluate the mandate set forth by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who appointed this task force last November.

The task force, which has seven members including Hall of Fame jockey John Velazquez and retired rider Ramon Dominguez, was charged with issuing findings and recommendations concerning jockey benefits, including health, life, disability, pension, or other similar benefits, and how those needs could be best provided through the resources of the racing industry.

However, the focal point at the first two meetings centered on health insurance for jockeys and how or who should pay for it, a controversial topic considering that jockeys are viewed by many as independent contractors.

At a December meeting, the jockeys proposed to the task force establishing a Health and Welfare Trust for New York riders, but it was unclear how that trust would be funded. A hypothetical insurance policy presented in that proposal cost \$1.334 million, with the jockeys proposing to fund about 30 percent. Presumably, the tracks of the New York Racing Association and Finger Lakes - as well as horsemen at both tracks would also contribute.

Anthony Bonomo, a horse owner and member of the New York Racing Association board, chairs this task force. In a recent trip to south Florida, where many New York horsemen are based for the winter, Bonomo talked to many trainers who opposed contributing to jockeys' health insurance considering they already contribute to a workman's compensation policy for the riders.

"I think what it was, was the misnomer that we were buying them health insurance. Everybody basically said 'Why should I be paying so that a jockey's daughter can go to the doctor?' Bonomo said. "What we were talking about today is it's really the jockey we're talking about, not their family. What we're talking about is when a jockey is injured in his profession - riding - does he have access to healthcare to take care of that injury? I think we're finding out the answer to that is yes. Now we're talking about what happens when it's not enough, what don't they have?"

It was task force member Alan Foreman, chairman and CEO of the Thoroughbred Horsemen's Associations, Inc., who suggested this panel do more research into what the riders' needs are and how to address them.

“Before you can draw any conclusions about whether to have a fund, where and how you're going to fund it — you have to find out what the needs are, how do you address those needs and if it requires financial resources what is the best way to do that?” Foreman said. “Where is the money going to come from? It's got to come from within the industry. The Governor made it very clear this industry has to be self-supportive.”

Foreman also noted that horse owners contribute \$10 million, or 10 percent of overnight purses offered at New York Racing Association tracks, to jockeys and backstretch workers.

“The owners in New York pay more in benefits to the backstretch, the jockeys than any other state in the United States,” Foreman said. “It's a very sizeable chunk of money.”

Velazquez, chairman of the Jockeys' Guild participated via phone from south Florida where he has recently resumed riding at Gulfstream Park. He felt the task force was getting “off topic due to pressure from horsemen's groups” who are against funding health insurance for riders.

Dominguez said it is incumbent on each task force member to identify the most pertinent issues and how to address them by the next meeting.

“Although there are certain things in place we also need to look at whether it is enough and whether we need to add more to it or are there some areas where we need a little more work,” Dominguez said. “It's not just one issue we're looking at here. It's something that is really going to take a little more work from each of us to try and come up with the most suitable solution for these issues.”

Originally, the task force was expected to issue a report to the Governor within 90 days of its first meeting, Nov. 20. Bonomo said the task force will need an extension of that deadline and will have to hold one or two more meetings before issuing a report.

“I mentioned to the Governor's office this is not an issue we can resolve in 90 days,” Bonomo said. “It may take a little longer than 90 days to generate a report.”