

Proinn Group's Polytrack surface is ground breaking

The announcement that Kranji racecourse will convert its sand surface to Polytrack this year was big news for SE Asian racing. For the Queensland-based company that secured the contract, it was even bigger. Staff writer Jessica Owers spoke to Proinn Group Chairman Kim Elliott about what it means for him, for Asia and for racing in Australia.



Main Polytrack course at Keeneland

In 2005 the Queensland-based Proinn Group scooped a lucrative corner of the racing market by becoming the only Austral-Asian licensee for the Polytrack range of surfaces. Developed in England more than 30 years ago by Martin Collins, the company now operates in collaboration with The Keeneland Association in America and Canada and is considered a leading manufacturer of synthetic riding surfaces and footings across the world.

Kim Elliott and the Proinn Group are the Austral Asian licensees, and when the Singapore Turf Club (STC) announced Proinn Construct as the contractor for the resurfacing of Kranji racetrack this year, Elliott and his team initiated the first Polytrack surface to be used on an Asian racing track.

"The Polytrack will be a big asset for Singapore racing", Elliott commented. "Its unique cushioning effect helps dissipate concussion forces to provide a racing surface that reduces injury." And that is the core of this designer surface.

The top layer of a Polytrack surface is a collaboration of sand, synthetic fibres and recycled rubber, all of which are carefully weighed and combined and coated in wax via a purpose-built plant. The wax coating ensures that water is neither absorbed nor settled on the surface, but is rather filtered through to the underlying vertical drainage system. The result is not only a safe and secure footing for horses over ground, but an all-weather racing surface for all weather conditions.

The STC's decision to resurface the Kranji sand track is a first for the SE Asian racing corner of the world. With StrathAyr already in place on the main turf course, the new resurfacing work will mean completely rejuvenated and ultra-modern racing surfaces for Kranji.

The current sand track is a 1500m Fibresand course that circumnavigates the inside of the turf course, currently in use for racing and training. Work by Proinn is expected to begin in July this year, with comple-

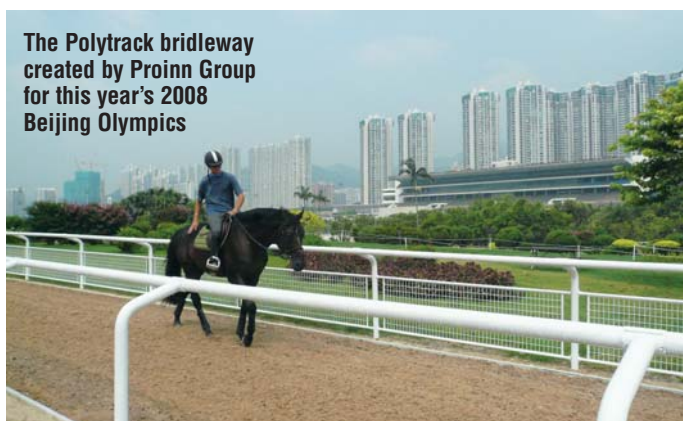
tion estimated as early as October. And in a bid to minimise disruption to trackwork for the 2000-plus horses ranked with the STC's Rating List, the 1600m long sand training track, located outside of the turf course proper, will also be converted to Polytrack in May, due for completion by June.

Kranji officials deliberated tirelessly in their selection of an appropriate surface for Kranji's sandtrack. Since August 2007, the STC had undergone a myriad of tests on the back of opinions from resident trainers and jockeys. The Polytrack surface was selected primarily under the opine that it will suit Singapore's climatic conditions, which in the midst of an equatorial summer can spell an inch of rain every day. Similar sentiments were echoed by US-based *The Blood-Horse* in 2005 when they reported: "More than three and a half inches of rain had absolutely no impact on the new Polytrack at Turfway Park, which opens the evening of September 7."

"The total vertical drainage system works on a 60mm thick porous asphalt base laid over 100mm of stone drainage blanket made up of compacted aggregates, topped up with 175mm of Polytrack material," Proinn's Kim Elliott divulges of the technical specs that make Polytrack so water resistant. "Embedded in the sub-base (beneath the aggregates) is an extensive network of perforated plastic pipes varying between 100mm and 200mm in diameter, designed to remove water from the track as efficiently as possible."

The STC Senior Vice (Racing) President Soong Tze Ming commented that there was not a stone left unturned in their process of selection.

"We have monitored the synthetic surfaces on factors such as injury rates, infiltration rates, surface hardness and surface temperatures to arrive at our decision. All the synthetic surfaces held up well during our tests, but the Polytrack proved to have the edge. It's a surface which we believe suits Singapore's tropical climate best and can sustain a higher frequency of racing all year round."



The Polytrack bridleyway created by Proinn Group for this year's 2008 Beijing Olympics



“I’d say it is the most promising thing I’ve seen in the future of racetrack surfaces.”

The Polytrack timeline began with its installation on English trainer Richard Hannon’s training gallops in Wiltshire in 1987. Since then it has been installed on the gallops of top UK trainers John Gosden, Marcus Tregoning and Paul Cole. In 2003 no better testimony came when it was instigated at Ballydoyle. It has been established on the Newmarket gallops at Long Hill, on Lambourn’s Kingsdown gallops, at the Lingfield Park racetrack, on the training tracks at Chantilly and Maisons-Laffitte. In 2004 Keeneland became the first North American racing facility to install the surface on their training track, and later at Wolverhampton, Great Leighs and Kempton Park in the UK, and Turfway Park and Woodbine in the US and Canada respectively. In 2006, Keeneland went one step further when it converted the main racing track from dirt to Polytrack.

“I’d say it is the most promising thing I’ve seen in the future of racetrack surfaces,” commented US trainer Richard Mandella to *The Blood-Horse*. “Horses get over it very easily and that would decrease the percentage of injuries. From a first view, it is amazing. It could be the biggest answer to short fields.” Fellow trainer Larry Demeritte went one step further by predicting it to be ‘the wave of the future’. “Horses’ feet don’t sting them on this surface. The amazing thing is how well they adjust to it their first time on it.”

Kim Elliott believes the footing security of the surface to be a major selling point. “Horses will be able to have a longer racing life. It gives a secure footing as well as being more load bearing than sand, which will in turn allow for more races to be run. No other synthetic track is closer to turf than ours.”

Polytrack research has observed an increased field size in races run on Polytrack around the world. Elliott notes that trainers are more confident to race their horses on a surface he describes as even and competitive. And anyone who witnessed last year’s Breeder’s Cup mud slashing will be grateful that with Polytrack’s reduced ‘kick-back’, viewers will actually be able to differentiate jockey colours on a wet day!

Proinn Group are experts at their trade with Singapore Turf Club just

one of a list of international projects that the Queensland company are working through. Recent completions have included a 7000sqm Polytrack exercise arena for the eventing horses of Dubai’s Princess Haya. In Hong Kong, Kim Elliott and his team have completed a 1.4km Polytrack surface not only for the Olympic equestrian teams but for the winding-down of racing horses in the extraordinary set-up at Sha Tin (to note, the Beijing Olympic equestrian events will be held at Sha Tin facilities in August due to an import discrepancy on the Chinese mainland).

Elliott maintains though that the Kranji resurfacing is a development of significant dimension because it will be Austral-Asia’s first Polytrack used for racing. “We’re very grateful to the STC,” he says. “We’ve worked very hard with them on this, especially through the trial period. We’re very proud of it.” Elliott maintains that Polytrack’s exposure across Australia will be greatly assisted by Kranji. He foresees days when the surface will replace the mainstream use of traditional turf courses across the nation.

“I can see the day when grass will become the jewel in the crown,” he muses, “when only the best races will be run over it. I personally believe that the wastage in the horse industry and the natural inability to get grass/dirt to perform at its best (due to over-racing, climate, excessive rainfall and such environmental factors) will be the reason why this is what people will go to. Change is always slow. In the first couple of years it is painfully slow. But eventually the main trainers will start to push for it.”

“Wastage in the horse industry is one of the biggest factors and this surface reduces injury.” It is that, Elliott stresses, which will propel clubs to use it. “Myself as an owner, it’s what we’re looking for. The breakdown rate of horses is not acceptable to owners here, and that’s what we all forget. When a horse breaks down, the trainer just finds another horse. The jockey just finds another horse.” Elliott adds that it is the owner who ends up with the incurring losses, and it is with this in mind that he approaches his Polytrack projects.

“I’m very interested in how to improve surfaces. In conjunction with the STC we are embarking on a research program not only for the improvement of services. We are trying to bring to the table research that can be done, and findings that should be published.”

And the Polytrack surface has certainly offered its own findings. In the US, a significantly large increase in soundness was found in horses post-race with no definitive evidence suggesting that the surface is anything but beneficial.

In the 21 years since Collins installed his first surface, nearly two million square metres of Polytrack has been laid on courses, training tracks and arenas around the world. The STC have commented that the surface will allow the Singapore racing industry to move up to a higher level. Elliott says in return that the Kranji club are second to none in their desire to strive for excellence in racing. It appears then a partnership made in heaven.

For more information visit www.proinnngroup.com



Lingfield Park opened with a new Polytrack surface in 2001