

Top Jamaica horses withdrawn from rich Santa Rosa meet

The last-minute withdrawal of some of Jamaica's best horses from the December 3 Caribbean National Racing Challenge raceday at Santa Rosa Park in Trinidad and Tobago has set off a firestorm of criticism about drug testing in local racing.

Up to last Tuesday evening, 18 local horses were nominated at various stages for the rich race meet which attracted entries from Jamaica, Barbados and St Lucia, in addition to the Trinidadian runners.

The US\$100,000 purses of two of the events attracted the best of Jamaica's horses.

Former Jamaican racing executive, Christopher Armond, had travelled to the island in the summer to entice the country's top horseflesh to the 10-race meet, which has a total US\$600,000 up for grabs.

With the majority of the horses having the possibility of earning more money in one race than they have earned over their entire career, connections jumped at the offer and Caymanas Park seemed destined to be a lonely place on December 3.

Nominations intact

Lloyd Cobran, manager of racing at the Jamaica Racing Commission (JRC), on Monday confirmed that all nominations were intact up to last Tuesday.

However, on Wednesday morning only six remained, three of which, sources claimed, were local-bred two-year-olds owned by Trinidadians and hitching a ride to their new home.

Only three Jamaican horses, from an initial 15, will actually race in Trinidad on December 3.

"Originally nominated, there were 18 different horses for 21 races, three were dual nominations for two races," Cobran explained.

"The last entry day was Wednesday 23. At 10 a.m., I only had six. Up to the Tuesday I was still expecting all to be in. At 10 a.m., when entries closed, I only got payment for six horses - ODIN in race two; ESQUIRE and OASIS, race eight; the other three were paid for by Trinidadian owners - MARTHA and SATYA TREASURE, both for the first race and JUST MY LUCK in the second race, all two-year-olds."

Cobran revealed that he had heard concerns about drug-testing, admitting that Trinidad and Tobago has stringent testing procedures.

"I heard rumours later that there is something to do with the drug-testing procedure. I didn't talk to anybody about it," he said.

Richard Azan, who trains MARK MY WORD, one of the horses who should have travelled to Trinidad, said he was "advised" to withdraw his four horses.

Azan said he has "no idea" about an alleged anabolic steroids claim, nor has he sought to find out why he was advised to withdraw his horses, by someone he described as "either a fellow trainer, my vet or the veterinary division of the JRC".

"I got a call advising me to withdraw my horses. I can't say if that's so or not so," he said about the anabolic steroid-testing allegations.

"I can't help you. I just had no chance to find out. I was in bed with the flu after going to Kentucky where I caught the flu terribly."

However, Azan did say he has sent an email to Armond, "asking for a full and detailed explanation as to what happened, plus my refund".

Cobran said although Jamaica had somewhat relaxed its drug testing to allow for thresholds for therapeutic drugs, Trinidad and Tobago is still in a "grass and water state".

Anabolic steroids, he said, should be included in drug testing locally, but pointed out that the cost was almost prohibitive.

Dr Paul Wright, owner's representative for the three horses who will race in Trinidad and Tobago, said steroids use is rampant at Caymanas Park.

"The computer cannot recognise any drug, unless the standard for that particular drug is fed into the computer's memory," he explained. "That's how people get away with doping. If you know people are using Equipoise and Winstrol, you get those standards, if you have those two, it will pick it up," he said.

However, the cost to acquire one standard, Wright said, was approximately US\$6,000.

"There is another one, Turbogestic, they use it every day. Some trainers whose horses move to other stables, you can't believe it's the same horse. They're using those drugs left, right and centre," he added.

Wright said he knew of the stringent measures in Trinidad and Tobago and has since been chastised for not telling others and causing an embarrassment.