



Grounds for change

Australia's Spreyton Park gets new surface, renamed Tapeta Park

BY JOE NEVILLS

IT TAKES a lot to make history at a 109-year-old racetrack.

Pulling up the track's grounds, replacing it with an all-weather surface, and then renaming the facility after that new surface is a good place to start.

Spreyton Park in Devonport, Tasmania, Australia, underwent a major facelift this past summer. The turf course was replaced with Tapeta Footings and the facility was re-named Tapeta Park. The rebranded racetrack, located on the north-western part of the island state, made its debut on September 4.

Eliot Forbes, chief operating officer of the state's government oversight body Tasracing, said the change was made to combat the wear and weather conditions that can lead to cancellations of race days on turf tracks.

"In Tasmania, we get really cold and wet winters and we've had trouble for some time with the performance of our tracks during the wintertime," Forbes said. "The really important thing for this track is when we come back to the next winter period, we have now got an option if the track's too weather affected at either of [Tasmania's] other two venues. We can transfer the meeting there."

When the decision was made to convert the track to a synthetic surface, Tasracing approached several suppliers, including Tapeta Footings and its creator, former Maryland-based trainer Michael Dickinson. As a former steward

of the Emirates Racing Authority, Forbes had firsthand knowledge of what the surface could do at Meydan Racecourse in Dubai.

"Based on [Dickinson's] reputation and some of my experience with his surfaces previously, we knew his was one of the premium surfaces out there with a great reputation," Forbes said.

Four racetracks around the world feature the Tapeta surface: Tapeta Park, Meydan, Golden Gate Fields in Northern California, and Presque Isle Downs in Pennsylvania. Additionally, ten training tracks, including Fair Hill Training Center in Maryland and Dickinson's own Tapeta Farm in North East, Maryland, use the surface.

"Australia likes their turf racing and rightfully so," Dickinson said. "But they recognize they need a good synthetic track for training and racing when the turf track is less than perfect, too firm, too soft, or just worn out."

Forbes said Tasracing would schedule about 15 racing dates at Tapeta Park during the 2011-2012 racing season on the 1,459-meter (7.25 furlongs) track.

The project broke ground in March and took about six months to complete. Forbes said the budget was about \$11.6-million (U.S.) and it was expected to finish under that figure.

The name change was part of



Tapeta Park, the former Spreyton Park in Tasmania, features the synthetic Tapeta Footings surface designed by Michael Dickinson

a sponsorship deal with Tapeta Footings for the next three years, with an option of three additional years.

Dickinson spent 12 weeks in Tasmania during the construction of Tapeta Park's surface and was in attendance for the track's opening meeting.

"We had nine races and 110 runners with a few also-eligibles who didn't get the chance to run," Dickinson said. "The first two races were won wire-to-wire and I was getting nervous. However, the last three races were won from nearly last and I'm happy to report the track played fair all day."

Trainer Michael Trinder, who sent out seven horses on the opening program, said the new surface was initially met with skepticism by fans and handicappers, but the results won many of them over faster than expected.

"A lot of people come and have been used to the green turf and so forth, and to be racing on the brown sand-like base, it looked different," Trinder said. "There was a lot of curiosity in the people who came to watch the race meeting, but I think all walked away very happy."

The horsemen were quick to warm to the new surface. Prior to opening day, Forbes said the track was overwhelmed with nominations for the barrier trials at Tapeta Park on September 1 from horsemen who were eager to test the surface.

"Trainers are very, very supportive of the track," Trinder said. "The numbers of trainers trying to relocate here to use the facilities as an advantage all have been very enthusiastic to come here."

Though Australia remains a country that considers turf its primary racing surface, Forbes said all-weather surfaces could be on the way to finding their niche on the continent.

"They're certainly increasing their importance in the Australian racing scene," Forbes said. "There's still a long way to go before you get the acceptance from both the range of horseplayers as well as horsemen. There will be a continuing emergence of the surface for specific applications." ■

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