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UD helps keep jockeys race ready

9:26 a.m., Aug. 30, 2010----Thoroughbred racing requires jockeys to maintain a low body weight, which often causes riders to indulge in unhealthy behaviors such as skipping meals or overeating and purging, especially on the day of a race. These actions can be dangerous for the jockeys, leading to dehydration, loss of concentration, and decrease in mental and physical abilities.

University of Delaware Cooperative Extension is continuing its partnership with Delaware Park to research how jockeys eat, and creating a nutritional program that will enhance the jockeys' performance while supporting a healthy lifestyle.

To educate and protect the riders, Cooperative Extension specialist Sue Snider and her team worked with the jockey health and welfare benefit board at Delaware Park to conduct individual assessments to determine the jockeys' eating habits and create personalized diet recommendations.

Snider and Nancy Cotugna, professor of nutrition at UD, spent six months surveying the jockeys about their diets and the practices they followed to maintain a low weight. The Cooperative Extension team then created an educational program focusing the importance of eating small amounts of nutritious, low-calorie foods throughout the day to sustain energy.

"The healthy eating practices were based on looking at the actual practices of the jockeys, their need to maintain a weight appropriate for racing, and good nutrition practices," Snider said. "We looked at the literature, especially recommendations from other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland."

Snider said members of the board, along with Robert Colton, president of the Delaware Jockey's Association, and Wesley Jones, a counselor with the Backstretch Employee Assistance Program, were "extremely helpful in assisting us to understand the jockey's needs and the restraints under which they work."

The Cooperative Extension team delivered an educational program at Delaware Park in June that brought jockeys and their families together to discuss food and nutrition.

Cheryl Bush, a Cooperative Extension agent, said the event was meant to facilitate a conversation within the family.

"It's kind of a taboo subject, jockey weight," Bush said. "We hoped that by bringing this to the whole family, there would be more discussion between spouses, more pressure on the jockeys to eat better."

The next step is to look at the food service given to jockeys at Delaware Park and other locations and to make suggestions for more nutritious options. A group of jockeys are assessing what foods they would like to have available in the jockey room for purchase during races.



Sue Snider discusses nutrition at Delaware Park.

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“This has been a wonderful project,” Snider said. “The jockeys are a great group and have been extremely accepting of us. Their job is extremely demanding and hopefully our suggestions will help their performance and overall well-being.”

Photo by Danielle Quigley

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