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Commission Defends Track Oversight Following Horse Deaths at Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack

Officials say preliminary findings show horse condition—not track surface—led to fatalities. Veterinary protocols have been reinforced ahead of the next race day on May 2.

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The Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack in St. Thomas. By. SOUTHLAND GAMING

Members of the St. Thomas-St. John Horse Racing Commission used their Wednesday meeting to respond to claims made in a January article published by a local media outlet, which linked the deaths of multiple horses during December 22 races at the Clinton E. Phipps Racetrack to a lack of oversight and unregulated doping. Commissioners dismissed the assertions as inaccurate and emphasized ongoing efforts to ensure veterinary compliance and safety for future events.

“Some of the statements that were made... were totally debunked,” said Commissioner Sheldon Turnbull, addressing a reporter’s request for comment. “The track itself was checked and it was found that it wasn’t anything to do with the running surface.” Turnbull also noted that the individual quoted in the article, Jay Watson, had been “removed from this commission.” Watson, who now chairs the Intra-Caribbean Thoroughbred Equine Association, claimed he had been “run out” for attempting to address concerns over doping and medication.

Current Commission Chair Hugo Hodge Jr. declined to comment directly on Watson’s remarks but cautioned against relying on unverified information. “We should be very mindful of the sources that we use and their validity... and any lingering agendas that may be present,” Hodge said. He also noted that the inspector’s report stemming from the investigation into the December 22 race day will be published in due course.

Preliminary findings from that inspection indicate the equine deaths were due to the condition of the horses, not the track. “More so it was the condition of the horses, which explains the heightened expectation for certifications by SGVI and other parties involved,” Hodge stated. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that modifications to the track surface have been made, including the addition of a sand turn and adjustments to the railings to ensure proper height and safety.

Hodge opened Wednesday’s meeting by reiterating the Commission’s long-standing requirement for pre-race veterinary inspections. “It always has been the position of the Commission that a vet would do an inspection on the horses prior to the races... and has the ability and the power, for lack of a better word, to determine whether a horse is fit to race or not,” he said. He added that the Commission also references national databases that list horses deemed unfit to race. “There was an inspection already, and there were three horses that were deemed unfit to run after that,” Hodge confirmed.

Shaine Gaspard, Chief Operating Officer of Southland Gaming VI, addressed the Commission to clarify his company’s role following recent media reports. “Given that our name also appears in articles that may not accurately reflect our role and our responsibilities,” Gaspard said. “We feel it’s important to clarify the facts that you just did.” He emphasized that Southland Gaming firmly opposes anything that compromises the safety of jockeys and horses, and is committed to protecting the integrity of the sport.

Gaspard also confirmed that horse certifications will be reviewed on race days before any purses are distributed. “We look forward to that on race day May 2—every horse is tested, certified, and officially cleared by a licensed veterinarian and fully ready to race on that day,” he said.

Earlier in the meeting, another representative from Southland clarified that the company is not responsible for the condition of the racetrack surface, responding to one of the criticisms raised in the news report.

Hodge emphasized that safety protocols are being strictly followed ahead of race day, and that the public will soon be able to review the full inspector’s report. For now, the Commission and its partners say they remain focused on transparency, compliance, and ensuring safe conditions for horses and riders alike.