



PEOPLE FOR
THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT
OF ANIMALS

June 4, 2026

Christopher L. Merz
Executive Director
Maryland Racing Commission

George P. Mahoney, Jr.
Chairperson
Maryland Racing Commission

Re: Maryland stewards fail to act following apparent whipping violations by Paco Lopez in the 2026 Preakness Stakes

Dear Messrs. Merz and Mahoney,

As a peak audience of 7.1 million viewers tuned in to watch the Preakness Stakes on May 16, 2026, Paco Lopez raised his wrist above his helmet to violently strike Napoleon Solo three times in the stretch. Despite reviewing footage of this reckless behavior, the Maryland stewards failed to find that Lopez had violated the whipping rule expressly prohibiting this action.

We urge you to open an inquiry into this ruling, determine how and why stewards found this behavior to be permissible, and take appropriate action.

Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority (HISA) rule 2280

(c)(1) explicitly states: “A Jockey shall not raise the crop with the Jockey's wrist above the Jockey's helmet when using the crop.” Mr. Lopez has repeatedly violated this rule, sometimes multiple times in a single race. This habit is part of a broader history of brazenly flouting rules. Mr. Lopez has racked up at least six suspensions in 2025 and at least 22 whip violations since 2022, including one for whipping two-year-old National Law in the head *after* a race in 2024.

Less than two months after the conclusion of Mr. Lopez's recent six-month suspension for whip violations, video and stills show that he violated rule 2280 (c)(1) while riding Napoleon Solo in the May 16 Preakness Stakes. Please see the stills at the bottom of this letter.

The Maryland stewards publicly offered three explanations for their finding that Lopez did not violate this rule:

- 1) *“He only used the crop four times on that horse, so maybe he's learning his lesson.”; “He hit the horse four times. We didn't feel it warranted any action.”*

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This is an apparent reference to HISA rule 2280 (b)(2), which states, “A Jockey may ... use the crop a maximum of 6 times during a race.” This appears to be a diversion from the actual violation. Neither PETA nor anyone else suggested that he violated the six-strike maximum limit.

- 2) *“Paco has an unorthodox riding style.”; “He’s a little bit all over the place and that can make it look like he’s doing something he may not be doing.”; “He’s very busy on a horse. He’s looking back quite a bit. As you look back, your head ducks down. You don’t raise your head over your hand.”*

This is another diversion, and worse, an apparent attempt to convince the public that what we can clearly see in the video and stills is not actually there. The rule makes no exemption for riding style, and if you will review the video carefully, you will see that Mr. Lopez is not whipping the horse when he looks behind. But when he has his wrist above his helmet and drives his whip down to hit the horse, he is not looking back; he turns to deliver the strike all in one motion which increases the torque and thus the force of the blow.

- 3) *“Still shots aren’t always the most accurate way of looking at something. If you watch the head-on shot from the replay, that tells a different picture.”*

The stills are screenshots taken directly from the official video replay. Reviewing footage from multiple angles, and at different speeds, and conducting frame-by-frame analyses are standard components of modern review systems in all horse racing jurisdictions and across professional sports when evaluating incidents that require accuracy and precision. In Maryland, racing facilities are required to have photo finish cameras as part of the official equipment used to determine race outcomes; photo finishes in horse racing are the obvious example of how a still and/or freeze frame is used to determine race outcomes. There is no clear reason why a different standard should be used here. Stewards would never suggest ignoring a photo finish in a close race in favor of a video as they do in this case.

That said, these particular strikes are not close calls, and neither the videos nor the images are ambiguous or conflicting. Again, we encourage you to review both the video footage and the stills from the race carefully to determine the accuracy of the stewards’ statement and draw your own conclusions. We think you’ll find that the video pan-shot replay, head-on replay, and stills show the same sequence of events: Mr. Lopez lifted his wrist above his helmet three separate times—so high that significant daylight was visible between them—before striking Napoleon Solo.

Please also see the still and video, below, taken from the grandstand and published on the *Bloodhorse* website.

The evidence and the rule could not be clearer. What is puzzling is why Maryland stewards seem to be manufacturing excuses to misinterpret the evidence and not enforce the rule.

The extreme whipping exhibited in this case isn’t just cruel—it could pose a serious safety risk to the other horses and jockeys on the track. Allowing one jockey to violate the rules to gain an advantage down the stretch penalizes those who abide by them, and it’s unfair to other trainers, owners, and the betting public. It sends a clear message that it’s acceptable to whip a horse severely and with impunity, including (and perhaps especially) when \$2 million is on the line.

As the last line of defense for Maryland’s racing industry and the Thoroughbreds who race at Maryland’s tracks, you have the authority to review this ruling and modify it as you deem appropriate. I urge you to open an inquiry immediately, for the sake of the horses the rules are meant to protect, the jockeys who are required to follow those rules, and the public that entrusts you with enforcing them. The integrity of the Preakness and Maryland’s racing industry rests with you. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Kathy Guillermo

Kathy Guillermo
Senior Vice President
Equine Matters Department

Jockey Paco Lopez in the Preakness Stakes, May 16, 2026

First strike in the stretch (wide-screen and close-up):



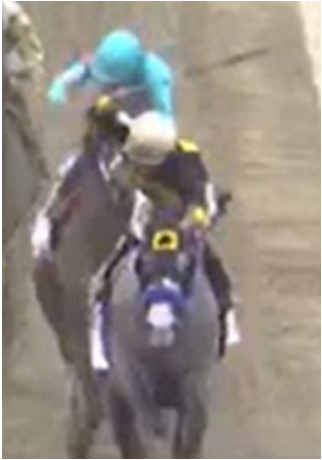
MARYLAND
JOCKEY CLUB
PREPAREDNESS AT LAUREL PARK

RACE 14 MINS 10

7:33 PM
FAST / FIRM

ODDS		EX 10& EX &10	
1	7	519	367
2	15	743	781
3	7	566	491
4	4	403	344
5	23	696	702
6	2	372	217
7	14	768	810
8	9-2	461	296
9	8	455	314
10	19	--	--





Second strike in the stretch (wide-screen and close-up):



MARYLAND
JOCKEY CLUB
PREPAREDNESS AT LAUREL PARK

RACE 14 MINS 10

7:33 PM
FAST / FIRM

ODDS		EX 10& EX &10	
1	7	519	367
2	15	743	781
3	7	566	491
4	4	403	344
5	23	696	702
6	2	372	217
7	14	768	810
8	9-2	461	296
9	8	455	314
10	19	--	--





Third strike in the stretch (wide-screen and close-up):

MARYLAND JOCKEY CLUB			RACE	MINS	7:33 PM
S2 DOUBLE WP 10&			14	10	FAST / FIRM
ODDS					
1	7	152.20			
2	15	1237.00			
3	7	191.80			
4	4	92.20			
5	23	801.00			
6	2	38.60			
7	14	383.40			
8	9-2	119.20			
9	8	184.60			
10	19	658.40			



Video posted by APharoah12 and BloodHorse:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHCfrehBHb8>

This screen shot is at timecode 32:59 of the video.

