

Thurles Racecourse Critical Incident Review

Summary Report

Date of Incident:	6 February 2025
Date of Review:	10–28 February 2025
Report Completion:	12 March 2025
Prepared by:	Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB)

Introduction

On 6 February 2025, a serious multi-horse incident involving five horses and jockeys occurred at the last fence during Race 2 (Racing Again February 20th Handicap Steeplechase) at Thurles Racecourse, Co Tipperary. The incident tragically resulted in the death of jockey Michael O’Sullivan and led to the euthanasia of his horse, Wee Charlie.

This summary, prepared by the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, outlines the key findings and recommendations from a comprehensive review conducted between 10–28 February 2025 and finalised on 12 March 2025.

Incident Overview

The race began at 14:05 under clear weather conditions, with the track officially rated as "Good." At approximately 14:09, a chain reaction of falls occurred at the final fence, involving five horses and jockeys in all:

- Three horses fell independently.
- One jockey was unseated due to interference.
- Another horse was brought down by the fallen horses.

Jockey Michael O’Sullivan suffered severe head injuries during the incident. Emergency response was immediate, with first responders on scene within 14 seconds, followed by medical and veterinary teams. The Helicopter Emergency Medicine Service (HEMS) arrived within 41 minutes and transferred Michael to Cork University Hospital by 15:40.

Despite expert care, Michael passed away from his injuries on 16 February 2025. His horse, Wee Charlie, was euthanised on 10 February 2025 following veterinary assessment due to a leg injury sustained in the incident. The remaining jockeys and horses involved suffered no significant injuries and resumed normal activities.

Key Findings

The IHRB review, based on video analysis, eyewitness reports, and post-incident inspections, found:

- **No Fault Identified:** There was no evidence of human error, equipment failure, or environmental factors as the primary cause. All jockeys were fit and licensed, horses were vetted and suitable to race, and safety equipment met IHRB standards.
- **Inherent Risks:** The incident resulted from a series of independent falls triggering a chain reaction, a rare but unavoidable risk in National Hunt racing.
- **Response:** The immediate response was swift and professional, adhering to IHRB protocols and best practices. Medical, veterinary, and logistical teams responded within seconds and acted effectively under pressure.
- **Track History:** Thurles' fall rate has decreased significantly since a 2020 reconfiguration (from 9.9% to 3.8%), though this event underscores the unpredictability of such incidents.

Recommendations for Enhanced Safety

While no single factor caused the incident, the IHRB has identified opportunities to further improve safety in Irish horseracing:

- **Training:** Expand racecourse safety training, including scenario-based drills for multi-horse incidents, and enhance medical training in severe head injury management and coordination with emergency air services.
- **Track Review & Maintenance:** Review track configuration and condition to ensure optimal safety and prioritise installation of a watering system at Thurles for ground consistency.
- **Monitoring:** Develop real-time data tracking on fall rates to identify incident trends across racecourses and proactively address emerging risks.
- **Veterinary Practices:** Implement standardised sedation safety procedures, conduct mandatory postmortem examinations after racing-related equine fatalities, and explore the use of technology to assess horse suitability to race.

Conclusion

The IHRB extends its deepest sympathies to the family of Michael O'Sullivan and acknowledges the professionalism of all emergency personnel involved. This tragic incident highlights the inherent risks of horseracing, despite exemplary response efforts and compliance with safety standards. It also underscores the need to learn from such events and the importance of continuous safety improvements. The IHRB remains committed to enhancing racecourse safety, ensuring the well-being of all participants while preserving the integrity of the sport, and will be acting on the recommendations arising from this review.
