

### **The Sport of Kings? The Toll of Racing on the Thoroughbred**

Horseracing is a sport of elegance, thrill, and mystique. Few of us have not been moved by the stories of champions such as Seabiscuit or Secretariat. Power, speed, glory, and competition – the stunning grace of thoroughbreds captivate us. Tragically, a darker side supports the beauty of the race: fragility, greed, drugs, whips, youth, disposability, and death. Racing is no longer the sport of kings. Without reform, racing will continue to harm the horses that make it famous.

#### **1,000 Pounds on the Ankles of a Dancer**

Over the generations, breeders have been able to produce increasingly swift thoroughbred racers. By breeding for speed, however, soundness and durability are often overlooked. As a result, the thoroughbred has become progressively more delicate. Even though more and more horses are being produced, only about 35% of thoroughbred foals have the strength to race. (Barnett) Even those who can race are showing signs of fragility. Compared to 50 years ago, horses run fewer races, break down more often at the track, and are at a greater risk for soundness flaws (Telias). “The thoroughbred horse is a genetic mistake. It runs too fast, its frame is too large, and its legs are far too small. As long as mankind demands that it run at high speeds under stressful conditions, horses will die at racetracks” (qtd. in PETA). The speed, grace, and beauty of thoroughbred horses have come at a high price.

Despite the fragility of the breed today, breeders insist on racing their horses. They find ways to dodge their animals’ problems by using drugs or even resorting to practices such as tapping. In tapping, the fluid from swollen joints is replaced with cortisone. Even though this procedure can keep a horse in racing condition for a short time, cortisone eventually erodes the

cartilage in the joints, leaving the horse disabled (Flake 32). Racing with health issues is very dangerous for the horse. Carol Flake, a long time observer of the racing industry, noted that “nearly every horse that went to the races was doing so in spite of some kind of conformation flaw, some athletic injury, some health problem. It would have been the same for any professional football team. But often a horse’s life and not merely his limbs were at stake.” (32) Many breakdowns and deaths over the years could have been prevented if owners paid due attention to the health of their racers.

### **Making it to the Winner’s Circle**

Racing is a multibillion-dollar industry in which men gamble their fortunes on the back of a horse. Most will do anything to gain an advantage, which commonly comes by way of both legal and illegal drugs. The two most popular drugs are Bute, a painkiller that allows sore or injured horses to race, and Lasix, an enhancer that prevents the bleeding in the lungs that is now the norm among racers (Telias). Other options include hormones, cone snail venom, and bronchodilators to open a racer’s airways (Chai). Owners use drugs to prevent a breakdown in their horses and mask the pain that should warn a horse away from overexertion and injury (Stansall and Tyler, *Bred to Death*). While the industry attempts to keep up with illegal drug use, it “seems to be a step behind the cheaters” (qtd. in Drape). As long as so much money rides on the victor of the race, drugs will be a problem in the world of horseracing.

The whip is another tool used by racers to gain an advantage. It is accepted by the industry, even though rules are in place to curb abuse. Because horses naturally only run for short distances, jockeys will use the whip to keep them running hard the whole distance of the race (Chai). The way the whip is used varies from jockey to jockey, and riders often earn a reputation by the way they use “the stick” (Durso). Sadly, the rules regarding whipping are vague enough to be difficult to enforce. An extensive survey by Animal Aid reported horses

being whipped up to 30 times in a single race with no consequences to the jockey (Stansall and Tyler, *A Hiding to Nothing*).

The career of the average racehorse begins very early, and ends when most horses have just reached physical maturity. The largest purses in racing are for horses that are 2-3 years old, and training of racers often begins when horses are even younger. As a result, thoroughbreds are subjected to the stresses of racing before they are fully mature (Telias). This leads to numerous health problems that can disable racers by the time they are four or five years old (Chai). The industry does little to prevent this. The popular Triple Crown series includes three taxing races in five weeks, and is run by 3-year-old horses (Fornatale). Racing horses when they are too young to do so safely sets them up for problems that will follow them throughout their lives.

### **It's All Part of the Game**

A racehorse has a very short career, usually racing for only 1-2 years. After retirement, the horses' only chance of making more money is through breeding. The horses that fail to produce winning foals become useless as business investments, making them disposable. Their foals often don't fare better, because less than half of horses bred for the sport ever race (Stansall and Tyler, *Unsporting Life*). Many racers, despite their life expectancy of 30 years, fail to reach their fifth birthday (Barnett). What is the fate of these beautiful animals? Sadly, a large number of racers find their end in the slaughterhouse. In 2006, an undercover reporter conducted an investigation of two British slaughterhouses. He discovered that together they destroy over 5,000 racers annually. (Barnett) Despite the billions of dollars at its disposal, the racing industry does little to help. Care for a retired racer is very expensive, often costing upwards of \$50,000 annually, yet the industry provides only enough money to care for about 50 of the approximately 5,000 horses that retire each year (PETA; Hind). For the horses whose owners have no interest in paying for a horse that no longer makes money, the result is disastrous. The slaughterhouse is

often the end even for horses that gained fame for their owners during their careers. Excellor, the only horse ever to defeat two Triple Crown winners, and Ferdinand, the winner of the 1986 Kentucky Derby, both were killed in foreign slaughterhouses after being sold several times to increasingly neglectful owners (Paulick; Mullaney). If racing's heroes are rewarded in such a fashion, the less successful stand little chance.

Perhaps the greatest danger to racehorses is the risk of injury and even death on the track. It is estimated that around 375 horses die or are killed each season. Around 115 of these horses die before they even leave the track. Injuries are a daily occurrence at races, many of which result in the horse's destruction (Stansall and Tyler, *Unsporting Life*). Except for the breakdowns of famous horses such as Ruffian and Barbaro, these deaths are usually overlooked and seen as simply "part of the game" (qtd. in PETA).

### **Reforming the Sport of Kings**

Racing as it is presently is an outlet for greed, pride, and cool business sense separated from responsible stewardship. "A horse race represents the naked striving to win, to be the best, to get the money, that we like to disguise in other pursuits. The thoroughbred represents the desire of humans to mold nature in their own image, to control it" (Flake 357-358). Nevertheless, "A great racehorse might be bred by the most deliberate of genetic determinists; he might be trained by the most calculating of trainers; he might be owned by the silliest of jet setters. But ultimately, he is something that eludes all of them" (Flake 357). There is something amazing about the bond that can occur between humans and horses, but that bond is being stripped away in the world of racing. People who care for animals cannot succeed in this sport; it is the businessmen and gamblers who gain the advantage. (Flake 8)

Racing is in desperate need of change, and several things need to occur. First, the public must be educated. The pressure of numbers often creates change, and if the industry is honest

about the bleak reality of racing, it can begin the process of reform. Secondly, the industry needs to establish incentives for the humane retirement of racehorses. Ideally, a portion of every winner's purse should be reserved for the care of horses after their careers have ended. (Flake 355) Retirement facilities and retraining programs would give owners a compassionate alternative to slaughter or neglect. Thirdly, it is essential for strict enforcement to develop against owners, trainers, and jockeys who drug their horses, abuse the whip, and race injured horses. Fourthly, racing should be confined to horses old enough to withstand the physical strain. Two-year-olds should be excluded from the race. Finally, tracks must strive to maintain the safest course possible. Tracks that are deliberately dangerous should be closed or redeveloped. Racing has the potential to once again be the sport of kings, if the horses that support it are treated with the recognition and care they deserve.

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