

When I was ten years old, I took my first horseback riding lesson. I still remember the thrilling mixture of nervous excitement and a rousing sense of achievement as I steered Angel — the palomino horse I was assigned to — around the track. Horseback riding lessons became the Saturday tradition I looked forward to more than anything. Three years later, my seventh grade teacher speculated that I could be a competitive racer, and soon after, I was proudly declaring to my instructor, “I’m thinking of going into horse racing.” As a great lover of animals, spending my future working with an equine companion as we achieved victory after victory felt like a dream come true. A dream that never happened. And, looking back, I couldn’t be more glad it didn’t. Because horse racing is not a dream sport for animal lovers — it’s an industry where innocent horses are bred, raised, and trained to lead a torturous lifestyle until the day they die.

In 1978, a racehorse named Alydar placed second in the Triple Crown horse race. He was found to have a “shattered” leg and was euthanized when unable to cope with the intense pain (PETA). Ten years later, an FBI investigation revealed that Alydar was deliberately injured — his leg had been tied to a pickup truck with rope. Alydar was trained against his very nature as a horse, sorely overworked both on the race track and away from it, and made to become the father of several younger racehorses. When his handlers could no longer possibly extract any other resource from him, they conjured an excuse for his death. This action — only one among several instances of injustice towards racehorses — is considered a scandal, a glance at the ruthlessness that lies behind the curtain of an innocent sporting spectacle. I will call it for what it was: murder.

A racehorse’s life is in danger from the moment he or she is born. Many horses are bred specifically for racing, yet only a select number see the racetrack in their lifetime. At ages as young as two years old, the horses are made to perform for potential buyers by running “at faster speeds than they would ever run in actual races” (PETA). If a horse is not the fastest, best-looking, or most competitive, he or she is most often declared “useless” and sent to a slaughterhouse. The horses that are “lucky” enough to be auctioned to racing organizations, meanwhile, are in for a

grueling life of abuse, stress, and agony. I could never have looked at these majestic creatures and judged their worth simply by “usefulness,” and I doubt I can now. Horses are closer to humans than we think — each one has a distinct personality and skill set. To say that deeming horses unworthy of their lives simply because their skill sets are different is unfair is an understatement. Imagine Stephen Hawking being killed because he couldn’t run a 4k.

During one of my riding lessons, I was fascinated to learn that my horse could sense which direction I wanted her to go, though she couldn’t see where I was looking. Horses are extremely perceptive to human emotions, being able to discriminate between positive emotions like excitement and negative emotions like anger based on voice, facial expression, and body odor. Horses are also incredibly gentle and trusting by nature, making them spectacular candidates for therapy animals. Equine-assisted therapy is proven to assist individuals with “anxiety and depression, PTSD, substance addiction, traumatic brain disorders, and symptoms that come with autism” (Kauffman’s). When I learned that horses had the potential to help my little brother — who is on the autism spectrum — manage his anxiety, I thought, “That’s much more worthwhile than running fast in races.”

When they are racing, however, horses are forced to go against their very nature as horses and put through experiences that are detrimental to their mental health. Horses are able to sense and mirror the emotions of their human companions — both positive and negative. In short, horses can sense when their rider is anxious. With the adrenaline that comes from such high-stakes events, stress is a guarantee. Also damaging to racehorses’ welfare is the lack of companionship in racing. Horses need to be around other horses for the sake of their well-being, however, racehorses are kept isolated from other animals. They are also constantly separated from any friends they might make as they travel to different race tracks with ever-changing handlers. Horses are proven to exhibit high levels of cortisol — the chemical associated with stress — when they are waiting to race. In other words, racehorses are forced to experience the same turbulent feelings of stress and anxiety as their riders and to deal with any potential health-related consequences. It’s cruel irony — the

animals that are most helpful for mental health are having their own mental welfare damaged.

Horses suffer even more abuse while racing. Racehorses start training from a young age, when their skeletal systems haven't finished developing. More concerning still, horses aren't built to run so fast on a hard track: "they weigh at least 1,000 pounds...[and] are supported by ankles the size of a human's" (PETA). They are not meant for this kind of exertion, and often suffer serious injuries from it. This doesn't stop the harm dealt by their handlers. When I was told to "encourage" my horse by slapping her on the sides of her neck, I had severe trepidations. Had I continued my lessons now, I wouldn't have been able to follow such an instruction at all. Horse racers, on the other hand, regularly use whips. Although some rules regarding whips are in place, horses can be "encouraged" as much as the rider desires at the last 100 meters of the track, and "there is no limit [on] the number of times horses can be slapped down the shoulder" (World Animal Protection Australia). This complete lack of proper limitations regarding horse treatment puts racehorses in dire risk of abuse from their adrenaline-fueled riders. How can an emotionally worked-up racer "cheated" out of first prize guarantee that they won't take their anger out on their companion?

Horses are oftentimes not allowed to recover from injuries they sustain on the racetrack. Racetrack veterinarians are called in not to treat the injury, but to administer unhealthy amounts of painkillers "whether it be legal, illegal, or non-necessary substances" (NBCUniversal News Group). Yes, illegal, unnecessary substances that can have horrible side-effects are forcefully injected into these animals, sometimes not in the correct places. "[Horses] can't say: 'Don't put the needle in me, don't make me take this...'" (NBCUniversal News Group). They have no say in a ruthless industry that treats them as gambling chips rather than living beings.

When I learned of the torment that racehorses endure on a daily basis, I immediately refused to support horse racing. My grandfather, who used to bet thousands of rupees on race horses and attend racing events regularly, immediately

pulled his money and his support out of the industry upon hearing of the injustices at play. With a bit of research and some serious conversations, I was able to convince him against this ruthless industry. If we employed this on a larger scale, if everyone could convince just one person not to support or place bets on horse racing, this corrupt sport and the wrongful practices behind it cannot survive. Another effective solution is to support organizations that facilitate equine-aided therapy, so that they can include more horses into their system, saving them from the slaughterhouse, or worse, the racetrack. The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship “claims to have helped 66,000 children and adults...each year” (White-Lewis). The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation strives to save horses from abuse and neglect on a worldwide scale. By supporting organizations like these, we can find loving homes and worthwhile jobs for horses that would otherwise be subject to a horrible fate: murder, or worse.

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