



The trouble with Horse Racing

“ Owners breed speculatively, hoping to produce an ‘X Factor’ champion. When horses come up short – as most inevitably will – there is a good chance that they will be disposed of. ”

www.animalaid.org.uk

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Introduction

The image the racing industry promotes is that of a harmless sport in which its prize asset – the Thoroughbred race horse – is cosseted and treated like a king. Occasionally, it is acknowledged, racecourse ‘accidents’ happen and an animal dies. But all sports, the industry goes on to argue, including those involving people, produce victims.

In reality, no other sport comes close to matching racing’s attrition rate. If it did, a ban would quickly be imposed. Approximately one in every 36 horses who starts a season’s racing will have perished by the end of it. They will have died as a result of a racecourse or training injury, or they will be killed after being judged to be no longer financially viable.

Far from being cosseted, race horses are typically confined to their stables for much of the day. They are released for short, intense periods of exercise and to travel – sometimes great distances – to and from race meetings. They are confined for such long periods, with feed brought to them, that some even have to be taught to eat grass once their racing days are over.¹

There is little financial provision for race horses at the end of their careers. Many are shot or lethally injected at their stables, or they are sent for slaughter. In 2007, Animal Aid secretly filmed apparently healthy but unwanted Thoroughbreds being shot in the head and butchered at a Taunton slaughterhouse.



Breeding

Approximately 18,000 foals are born into the closely related British and Irish racing industries each year.²

There are many crude jokes about the supposedly perfect life of the breeding stallion. But his is an existence of near isolation and deadening routine. Barring physical breakdown, it can go on for 20 or more years.

During the six month breeding season, a stallion can be required to 'cover' three mares a day. Outside the breeding shed, he is kept separated from mares and other males. When not housed in his stable, he is likely to be confined behind high fences.

Breeding females are subjected to drugs and prolonged periods of artificial light to control and speed up reproduction. Left to their own devices, mares in the wild have one foal every two years, or perhaps two every three years. They deliver in the spring, after a pregnancy lasting 11 months. The racing industry forces many mares to produce a foal every year until late in life – a burden of almost constant pregnancy.

The industry is ruthless when sizing up the potential of newborn foals. About four times as many Thoroughbreds are produced for racing than 50 years ago. But a smaller proportion – currently, only 40 per cent – actually go on to race. Some of the 'failures' are taken up by other equestrian events but most cannot be accounted for. The evidence points to a significant proportion being killed at their yards, fed to hunting hounds, or butchered for meat.

Why is there so much 'over-production'?

Owners and breeders are hooked on the promise of big prizes and glory. They breed speculatively, hoping to produce an 'X Factor' champion. When horses come up short – as most inevitably will – there is a good chance that they will be disposed of.



SPORTSDAYSSTROLLER, WHO ANIMAL AID HELPED RESCUE FROM IMMINENT SLAUGHTER



NEGLECTED, RETIRED RACE HORSE AND HER FOAL AT LAST FIND SANCTUARY



A HORSE BEING WHIPPED IN FULL FLIGHT DURING A SPRINT RACE



PUSHED TO THE LIMIT: HEAR THE ECHO LIES DEAD AT THE END OF THE GRAND NATIONAL

© JON SUPER/PA WIRE

Inbred for speed

Horses were once bred with different characteristics, depending on whether they were to race over jumps or over short or long distances on the Flat. Jump-race horses would be heavier-boned and sturdier.

The world's dominant breeders now produce a 'one model fits all' animal who is asked to do a variety of jobs that he or she can no longer safely undertake. Speed is a key requisite for this modern all-purpose Thoroughbred – at the expense of skeletal strength and general robustness.

The consequences are felt especially by horses entered into jump racing – the sector responsible for 80 per cent of racecourse fatalities. But animals racing on the Flat also suffer a high casualty rate. Amongst a typical group of 100, one fracture will occur every month.⁵ Typically, race horses die – or are killed – as a result of a broken limb or neck, severe tendon injuries, spinal injuries, or a heart attack.

One horse dies on a British racecourse every two days, even though these deaths are rarely reported in the media.⁴

Serious racing-related illnesses such as bleeding lungs and gastric ulcers are now also endemic. Eighty-two per cent of Flat race horses older than three years of age suffer from bleeding lungs (Exercise-Induced Pulmonary Haemorrhage), which can cause blood to leak from the nostrils.⁵ Gastric ulcers are present in no fewer than 93 per cent of horses in training, in whom the condition gets progressively worse. When horses are retired, the condition improves.⁶

CALCULAITTE CRASHES THROUGH THE FIRST FENCE AT DONCASTER, BUT IS FORCED TO RACE ON



Use of the whip

Thoroughbred race horses are the only animals who can be legally beaten in public for sport. They can be hit so hard that, as racing's regulatory body acknowledges, they come out in weals.

Animal Aid's 2004 report, *A Hiding to Nothing* – a detailed analysis of 161 races involving 1,500 horses – found that horses in a state of exhaustion and out of contention were beaten. The whip was used on the neck and shoulders, as well as on the hindquarters. Horses being whipped 20, or even 30 or more, times during a race were observed. Though the rules were breached numerous times, regulatory stewards took no action.

Jockeys are periodically penalised for excessive use of the whip – usually amounting to a riding ban of a day or two – but they and the owner of the horse do not forfeit their prize money.

Advocates of the whip argue that it assists horses to perform better and run more safely and that it provides helpful chastisement for when they behave 'badly'. *A Hiding to Nothing* shows that whipping is more likely to drive horses off a true line and place them and other horses in danger. The same evidence shows that whipping is less likely to produce an 'improvement' in behaviour. Rather, the horses become fearful and hesitant.

Norway banned the whip in 1982 – an action that has been met with the enthusiastic approval of racecourse officials, horse trainers and spectators, according to Hans Petter Eriksen, administrative director of the Norwegian Jockey Club.⁷

HUNTERVIEW IS SHOWN THE WHIP BY JOCKEY TOM SCUDAMORE AT AYR RACECOURSE IN APRIL 2010



© LYNNIE CAMERON/PA WIRE



© SEAN DEMPSEY/PA WIRE

THE 1,000 GUINEAS 2010: THE USE OF THE WHIP BY THE JOCKEY IN THE YELLOW COLOURS CAUSED HIS HORSE TO DRIFT DANGEROUSLY INTO THE PATH OF THE OTHER RUNNER

When racing has finished

Around 7,500 horses leave racing each year.

'Despite all the [racing industry] initiatives and PR, there is a black hole in the records on the fate of ex-race horses,' according to a recent investigation by *Horse & Hound* magazine.⁸

Even by the industry's own optimistic estimates, one third of the 7,500 are killed or disappear.⁸

There is, in any case, precious little provision for the survivors. The industry receives around £100 million each year from bookmakers' profits alone. It spends most of it on prize money. The sum it allocates to caring for retired Thoroughbreds is less than £60,000 – not much of a reward for animals on whom this multi-billion pound industry depends. Such an amount, at a liberal estimate, is sufficient to provide for just 20 horses.



A THOROUGHBRED MARE BEING SHOT AT POTTER'S ABATTOIR, TAUNTON, SOMERSET

Conclusion

The evidence points to a hard-headed, exploitative industry that – notwithstanding the soft-focus PR message – treats race horses as disposable commodities. It routinely produces more Thoroughbreds than racing can accommodate but takes virtually no responsibility for the 'surplus'. Unwanted horses are sold to whoever wishes to buy them or they are killed in their yards or sent for slaughter. The hundreds of annual racecourse and in-training deaths are cynically written off as unforeseen accidents. Sometimes, as many as four horses perish in a single day at one racecourse.⁹ Terms such as 'statistical blip' are used to explain such carnage.

Animal Aid has investigated the horse racing industry for more than a decade, producing several detailed reports and conducting a series of undercover investigations. Our evidence leads us to the conclusion that it is an industry that does not warrant public support in the form of betting income, racecourse attendance fees or commercial sponsorship.



SLAUGHTERED HORSE



**NEWTON ABBOT RACECOURSE:
VET LOADS GUN AS INJURED
ASHBY JO AWAITS DESTRUCTION**



**VET ATTEMPTS TO KILL ASHBY
JO - THE BULLET BLOWS A HOLE
THROUGH THE HORSE'S EAR**



**THE INJURED HORSE IS ROUGHLY
HANDLED BY THE VET**



**VET TRIES TO SHOOT ASHBY
JO BUT AGAIN FAILS**

The things they say... in defence of horse racing

If the horses didn't like it, they wouldn't carry on running after their jockeys fall off.

Horses sometimes carry on attempting to run with a severely broken leg – but not out of enjoyment. Horses are herd animals. They feel safer when part of a group, especially in the noisy, often unfamiliar race-day environment.

The horses enjoy the challenge.

They are often not equal to the challenge. The modern industry, as we have seen, concentrates on breeding lighter-boned, speedier animals for Flat racing. Less successful Flat race horses, or those good at clearing fences, are consigned to jump racing. But, because they are fine-tuned for speed rather than skeletal strength, they risk fatal injury when they fall.

Horse death is natural. Horses in the wild die too.

There is nothing natural about whipping highly inbred horses to force them to run as fast as they can and jump a series of life-threatening obstacles.

**LOVE DITTY LIES EXHAUSTED,
COVERED IN MUD**



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Action Points

- Don't bet on animals' lives! Betting income and racecourse attendance fees keep the racing industry in business.
- Order a free information pack and support Animal Aid's work to end animal suffering.

Notes and references

- 1 Carrie Humble, founder Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre, in 'Retiring Gracefully', *Blackpool Gazette*, 6 April, 2006.
- 2 *Fewer have been born during the current economic downturn.*
- 3 'Research says racing early can lower injury risk', *Racing Post*, October 31, 2002.
- 4 Race Horse Deathwatch www.horsedeathwatch.com.
- 5 Exercise-Induced Pulmonary Haemorrhage (EIPH), Dr David Martin, Centre for Equine Studies, August 2000. Animal Health Trust website.
- 6 'Factors associated with gastric lesions in thoroughbred horses', Murray MJ, Schusser GF, Pipers FS, Gross SJ. *Equine Vet J* 1996 Sep 28(5): 368-374.
- 7 Personal correspondence.
- 8 'Ex-racehorses: has life really improved?', *Horse & Hound*, May 6, 2010.
- 9 Examples of four deaths in a single day at one racecourse are: Aintree 4 April 2010, Wetherby 14 October 2009 and Wincanton 19 March 2007. See www.horsedeathwatch.com.



Animal Aid exposes and campaigns peacefully against all animal abuse, and promotes a cruelty-free lifestyle



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