

British Horseracing Authority fails to reduce horse fatalities

Mounting evidence of the pressure felt by the racing industry came this week with an unusually frank confession by the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) that the number of equine fatalities increased in 2018 with a death toll of 202 horses.

Speaking in percentages – which the BHA is always keen to do – 2018 was the worst year for horse deaths since 2014. The deaths, says the BHA, represent 0.22% of runners – a percentage which itself needs explaining. ‘Runners’ refers to the number of horses who have run in races or, put another way, if you have ten horses who each run 10 races, and one horse dies, the BHA will say that the death is one in 100 runners – rather than one in ten horses. According to the BBC, the 2018 death toll *‘is higher at 1.049% per horse - 202 out of 19,249 individual horses’*.ⁱ

So what has prompted the BHA to be spurred into a new era of contrition? Well, one potential factor was an historic government debate that took place at the end of last year where it was proposed – as the result of a 105,000+ signature government e-petition started by Animal Aid – that the BHA should be stripped of its role as welfare regulator and replaced with an independent body without any connections to commercial racing.

Although the government has thus far stated that it sees no need for such a change, the racing industry has overtly been at pains to show that it takes welfare concerns seriously and cares about the horses who are conscribed into racing. A flurry of reports and promises have emerged since the 2018 government debate, starting with the (albeit lacking) report into the seven equine deaths at the 2018 Cheltenham Festival and the promise of a review into the whip. But, it’s important to remember that there were seven deaths at the 2016 Cheltenham Festival, and, as far as we’re aware, back then, this was not thought important enough to hold a review.ⁱⁱ Following the spotlight being shone on the BHA during the government debate, there has been a noticeable change in attitude.

And, coming back to the whip, there has been a rise in the amount of criticism of the whip in the press at the end of last year and the start of this year. It is another area of race horse welfare that the BHA has failed to control or to reduce the amount of abuse by jockeys. Animal Aid’s data shows that breaches of the whip regulations have increased each year since 2016. In 2018, there were 548 breaches of the whip by 269 jockeys, compared with 524 breaches by 264 riders in 2017. In 2016, Animal Aid recorded 470 breaches by 246 jockeys, making 2018 the third year in a row that the number of breaches and the number of jockeys breaking the rules has risen.

The BHA knows that the issue of the whip sits badly with the public because hitting animals is, quite frankly, wrong. In a 2018 YouGov poll, 68% of respondents said they opposed the use of the whip in racing. When only including those who expressed a view, this figure rose to 83%.

In 2007, Animal Aid launched an online database of all race horse deaths we were able to discover through tracking – painstakingly and methodically – all races. In 2018, we managed to record 196 fatalities – just six short of the BHA’s official figure. What is

different, however, is that Animal Aid names the horses and where and how they died. We have repeatedly called on the BHA to publish full data about all the horses who lose their lives racing or in training – a plea that has been roundly disregarded. The BHA refuses to engage with us because we ultimately want to see an end to racing.

We do want to see an end to racing because to purpose-breed, break and use an animal in order to make money is ethically wrong. However, we're well aware that we still have a way to go from seeing the racing of animals conscribed to history. In the meantime, we will continue to expose the many cruelties experienced by animals who are unable to speak for themselves.

Right now, though, with the BHA on the back foot and the focus firmly on the ways in which it has failed to protect race horse welfare, we continue to pressure the BHA to be fully open and honest and to start publishing full details of all horses who die racing, as a result of racing or in training. It should also report to the government on the fates of all those horses ejected from racing because they fail to make money. And, at the very least it should ban the whip. Ultimately, we believe it's time for the BHA to step aside and for a new, independent body to take control of race horse welfare. We will continue to campaign for this goal.

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/horse-racing/47040194>

ⁱⁱ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/cheltenham-festival-1500-horses-died-british-racecourses-ten-years_uk_58c6780de4b054a0ea6b93b3

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