

# Horse racing

Horse racing provides huge rewards for the leading owners, trainers and jockeys – the people who race the most successful horses can become rich and famous, but what does it mean for the horses caught up in the industry?

## Breeding

Over 14,000 horses are born into the closely related British and Irish racing industries each year.<sup>1</sup> Owners and breeders are hooked on the promise of big prizes and glory, so they breed lots of horses, hoping to produce a champion.

Approximately 20 per cent of Thoroughbreds born will never race, and a substantial majority will have careers of just two or three seasons. Some of the 'failures' are taken up by other equestrian events, but many cannot be accounted for.<sup>2</sup> The evidence points to a significant proportion being shot at the stables or killed for meat, or repeatedly changing hands in a downward spiral of neglect.<sup>3</sup>

## Pushed to the limits

Horses were once bred with different characteristics, depending on whether they were to race over jumps (fences), or over short or long distances on the Flat. Horses bred for National Hunt (Jump) racing would be heavier-boned and sturdier.

The world's dominant breeders now produce a 'one model fits all' animal for both Flat and Jump racing. Speed is a key requirement for this modern all-purpose Thoroughbred – at the expense of skeletal strength and general robustness. They are like Formula-1 racing cars - fast but fragile.



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The consequences are felt especially by horses entered into Jump racing – the type of racing in which most deaths (over 70%) occur. But animals racing on the Flat also suffer a high casualty rate.



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Horse and rider lie injured on a racecourse.

## ‘One horse dies on a British racecourse in nearly every two days of racing.’

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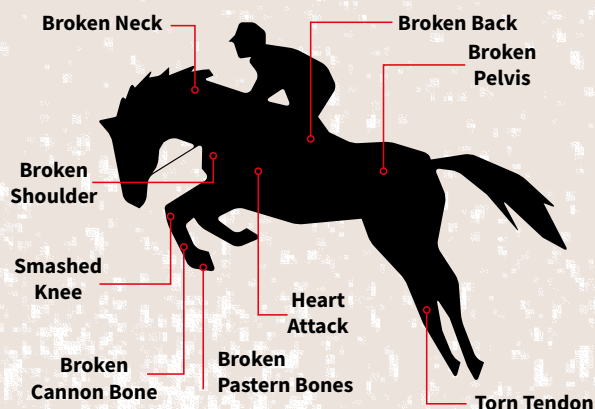
Each year, approximately one in every 60 horses who starts a season’s racing will have perished by the end of it. They will have died because of a racecourse or training injury or an illness such as colic, or they will be killed because they are no longer profitable for the owner.<sup>6 7</sup>

An Animal Aid study of available evidence showed that around 200 horses die on British racecourses every year, and about the same number almost certainly die in training or are killed because they fail to make the grade.<sup>8 9</sup>

Many of these fatalities occur during, or immediately after, a race, and result from: a broken leg, back, neck or pelvis; fatal spinal injuries; a heart attack; or burst blood vessels. The other victims perish from training injuries or are killed after being assessed by their owners as no-hopers.<sup>10</sup>

Racing is a stressful experience for horses and can lead to serious racing-related illnesses. 75% of race horses suffer from bleeding lungs, which can cause blood to leak from the nostrils.<sup>11</sup> Gastric ulcers are present in around 93% of horses in training, in whom the condition gets progressively worse. When horses are retired, the condition improves.<sup>12</sup>

### Racing injuries that kill horses



### The fate of Ashby Jo

Ashby Jo broke his leg while racing at Newton Abbott in 2018. He was taken aside, and screens were put up so spectators couldn’t see what happened.



1) The vet loads his gun.



2) He shoots, but the bullet goes through Ashby Jo’s ear.



3) The injured horse struggles to get away.



4) The vet aims again at Ashby Jo’s head but again fails. Ashby Jo was finally killed by an injection after another vet came to the scene.



## Use of the whip

The riders whip the horses during a race to 'encourage' them to run faster. The industry claims that this does not hurt the horse, but there is ample evidence to indicate that it does. Although horse skin is thicker than human skin, recent research has shown horses are not insulated from pain caused by a whip strike. The research shows that humans and horses have the equivalent basic anatomic structures to detect pain in the skin.<sup>13</sup> Another study compared three years of UK whip races and non-whip races. It found that whip use had no positive effect on increasing safety, improving steering, reducing interference, or shortening finish times.<sup>14</sup>

Animal Aid is calling for a ban on the whipping of horses during racing (other than for safety reasons). In a 2018 opinion poll, 68% of respondents said they opposed the use of the whip in horse racing.<sup>15</sup>

Norway banned the use of whips from most flat races in 2009<sup>16</sup> and there have been recent restrictions in the USA. In 2020 New Jersey adopted a comprehensive whip ban (except for safety) covering all races<sup>17</sup> and California and Kentucky announced major restrictions on whip use.<sup>18 19</sup>



**'Horses are the only animals who can be legally beaten in public for sport'**

## 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.

Horses are not aware of the danger that they face when racing. The racing industry, as we have stated, concentrates on breeding lighter-boned, all-purpose animals for both Flat and Jump racing. But, because they are primarily bred for speed rather than skeletal strength, they risk fatal injury when they fall. Horses race because that is what they have been trained to do, but they are unaware of the risks involved.

*'The horses enjoy the challenge'*

*'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.

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## The Grand National

Animal Aid has for many years called for the Grand National to be banned. It is a deliberately dangerous National Hunt Jump race. An overcrowded field of 40 horses are forced to confront 30 hazardous jumps, over a course of nearly four-and-a-quarter miles. Thirteen horses died during the annual Grand National race between 2000 and 2021.<sup>20</sup> A further 25 horses died on the same course in other races over the same period.<sup>21</sup>



Several horses fall at Becher's Brook in the Grand National.

John Giles on Alamy



## When the racing is over...

Around 7,500 horses<sup>22</sup> leave racing every year, but many are left to an uncertain future.<sup>23</sup> After a life of fast-paced racing, retired racehorses can be very nervous and highly strung. They make difficult 'pets' and tend to be sold from owner to owner, never getting a permanent home.

Horse racing is said to be worth £3.5 billion<sup>24</sup> to the economy, yet it seems that the industry lacks the will to provide for a retirement fund for the very animals who help generate these funds. Many are shot or lethally injected at their stables, or they are sent for slaughter.

In 2019, 347 unwanted horses connected to the racing industry were killed in slaughterhouses in England. Some of these animals had been 'retired' from racing after earning lots of money for their owners through racing, while others had been consigned to the slaughterhouse because they failed to perform well enough on the track.<sup>25</sup>



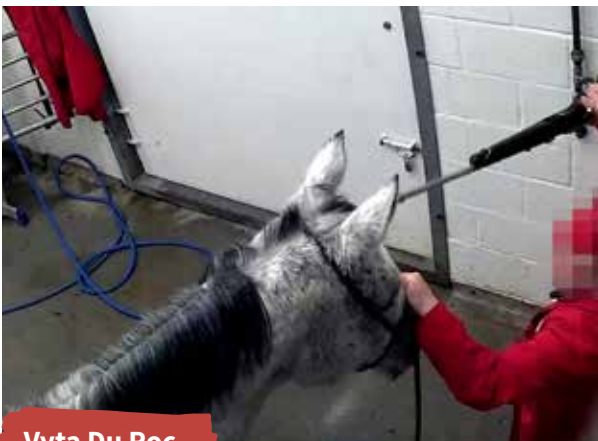
Neglected, retired race horse and her foal at Last Find sanctuary.

Horses being unloaded for slaughter.



### High Expectations

High Expectations endured a long journey to the slaughterhouse, travelling hundreds of miles to his death. Despite being a winner, there was no compassion left for High Expectations. A week before being shot, he had to endure a dark, damp lairage where his beautiful light bay coat turned grimy and matted. His name forgotten, now just the number 0707 crudely sprayed on his back for identification.



### Vyta Du Roc

Beautiful dappled grey gelding Vyta Du Roc was an outstanding French-bred race horse. He earned his connections over £175,000 in prize money, including winning at Ascot and Cheltenham Racecourses. His last race was 17 November 2019. Less than three months later in February 2020 he was slaughtered for meat. What does a race horse have to do to deserve a retirement?

### Glossary

**Flat racing:** A type of horse racing where the horses do not jump over fences.

**National Hunt or Jump racing:** A type of horse racing that includes obstacles for the horse and jockey to jump. These can be small ones known as hurdles or large ones known as fences.

**Thoroughbred:** A breed of horse used for racing.

**Steeplechase:** A horse race in which competitors are required to jump diverse fence and ditch obstacles.

### What you can do to make a difference:

- Order a free Horse racing action pack at [animalaid.org.uk/youth](http://animalaid.org.uk/youth)
- Join Animal Aid and help to campaign against horse racing
- Ask your teacher to invite someone from Animal Aid to give a talk in a lesson on horse racing or animal rights.