



Animal Aid – Grand National Briefing & Fact Sheet

Summary

The Grand National course is notorious for the consistency with which it kills horses. Despite numerous changes to the course and conditions of the race, the course remains a killer.

In the latest running of the race in 2022, two horses – Éclair Surf and Discorama – died as a result of the main Grand National race, showing that the Grand National remains what it has always been – an appallingly hazardous test for horses, and one that continues to produce miserably spectacular falls and collisions. When a race passes without a fatality, it is due to good fortune rather than good planning.

Background

The Grand National has been staged under various names almost every year since its inception in 1839. It is held at Aintree in Liverpool and is run over a stamina-sapping distance of four-and-a-quarter miles on a roughly triangular-shaped course. The course comprises 16 fences, 14 of which are jumped twice. This means that the set number of 40 competing horses are confronted by a total of 30 fences.

Some important problems

- Too many demanding fences – 30 in all – have to be jumped
- Unusual and awkward fences catch horses out
- There are concerns about the horses' abilities and experience, and the demands made upon them
- The crowded field of 40 runners causes death and injury
- The extreme distance – four-and-a-quarter miles – makes it the longest in Thoroughbred National Hunt (jump) racing

The fences

The Grand National fences are unique. They are notably bigger than those found at other British racecourses, both in height and spread. Many have ditches on either side of the obstacle that are wider and deeper than those a horse would normally expect to jump.

It is often claimed that today's Grand National fences are considerably less formidable than those which confronted horses in Victorian times. In fact, if we look back to the course of 1897, when legendary race horse, Manifesto, won his first Grand National, there is no significant change in the total height jumped when compared with the fences jumped today. While some obstacles have been lowered by a couple of inches, others have increased by the same amount.

The fences have seen physical changes. From 1961, they were sloped on the take-off side. In 2009, run-outs were introduced that enabled fences to be bypassed by the runners and loose horses. In 2012, more changes were made to the core of the fences after Parliamentary campaigning by Animal Aid.

A significant danger is the sheer volume of horses taking part in the race. Since 2000 there has been a set field of 40 horses*. This makes the race much more dangerous than in former years when the mean field size, between 1839 and 2000, was 29. (*since 2000 three races had 39 horses take part and one race 38 due to last-minute non-runners)

The deadly fences with examples of horses who were killed in the Grand National

Fourteen of the 16 fences are jumped twice during the race, which means that the first fence in the race is jumped a second time as the 17th fence, and so on.

Fence 1 (& 17): Plain

The 40 horses come to this fence at some pace. It has brought down as many as nine horses at a time.

Deaths include: Up For Review 2019 – Brought down and killed
Tyneandthyneagain: 2006 – Fell here and was killed running into a fence later in the race. Pashto: 1998 – Was killed in a first fence fall.

Fence 3 (& 19): Open Ditch

This is a big, five-foot-high fence with a wide, open ditch on the take-off side, making the obstacle extremely demanding.

Goguenard: 2003 – Fell here and was hit by another falling horse and jockey. Severely injured, he was immediately destroyed. Other deaths: Vulcano, Raccoon.

Fence 4 (& 20): Plain

This is the most underestimated fence with regards to its high fatality rate. It's a 'standard' plain National fence that is four feet ten inches high and without any ditches – yet it is deadly. There is no clear explanation as to why this is.

Ornais: 2011 – Fell and died instantly from a broken neck – clearly seen under a green tarpaulin during the BBC TV race coverage and described by their commentator as an 'obstacle on the course'.

McKelvey: 2008 – Ran loose after falling at this fence and was subsequently destroyed. Other deaths: Manx Magic, Do Rightly, Smith's Band.

Fence 6 (& 22): Becher's Brook (*additional details in later section*)

Fence & Ditch

Becher's is the Grand National's most infamous fence. It is positioned on a diagonal, and the four-foot-ten-inch obstacle has a covered ditch and a drop on the landing side up to five feet eight inches.

According To Pete: 2012 – Broke his shoulder when landing upon a fallen horse at this fence. Synchronised: The Gold Cup winner fell at this fence in 2012 before sustaining a hind leg break as a consequence of running loose.

Dooney's Gate: 2011 – His back was broken after he fell and was hit by another horse. Graphic Approach: 2007 – He fell here then ran loose and tried to return to the stables. He jumped a rail, fell, was concussed and suffered a black eye. He died a month later from further complications linked to the fall. In its reporting of Grand National deaths, the BHA has failed to acknowledge Graphic Approach as a fatality. Other deaths: Alverton, Winter Rain, Dark Ivy, Brown Trix, Seeandem, Eudipe.

Fence 8 (& 24): Canal Turn

The course takes a challenging 90-degree turn immediately after this fence. This causes crowding in the approach, as jockeys fight for an inside berth.

The Last Fling: 2002 – After leading the field for the majority of the race, this tired horse was killed falling at this awkward five-foot-high fence.

Roll A Joint: 1990 – A Scottish Grand National winner, he took a deadly fall here on the first circuit. His body could be seen briefly on TV part-concealed under a sheet, after he had been dragged away from the fence.

Lilbitluso: 2018 – The horse fell at this notorious fence and was subsequently destroyed due to the severe injuries he suffered.

Fence 9 (& 25): Valentine's Brook

This is a five-foot-high fence, with a ditch and a drop of five feet six-inches on the landing side. Many horses have been killed here

The famous Zeta's Son was killed at Valentine's Brook in 1977.

Two horses, Plaisir D'Estival and Prudent Honour, broke their necks in simultaneous falls in 2010 during the Topham Chase, which is run over the Grand National course.

Fence 15: The Chair

This is the highest fence on the course, at five feet two inches, and also the narrowest. A six-foot-wide ditch immediately precedes it. Its total spread is 11 feet. It is jumped only once.

Deaths include: Grey Sobrero, Land Lark, Kintai.

Changes to the race

Various changes to the course have been introduced over the years in the name of improved safety. But some of these 'safety measures' have subsequently been reversed. (See below)

Extreme distance of the race

The race has increased in distance over the years – from four miles to the present distance of four-and-a-quarter miles. The event has seen numerous horses collapse at the end of the race, some of whom have died. Most recently, in 2009, Irish horse Hear The Echo collapsed and died, shortly before the finishing post. Millions of television viewers were especially distressed to see the 2011 Grand National winner, Ballabriggs, being thrashed at the end of a race that left him so exhausted, that he needed oxygen. His jockey, Jason Maguire, was banned from racing for five days but kept his prize money and his winner's position.

'Quality' of horses entered

It has recently been stipulated that all runners in future Grand Nationals must have finished in at least fourth place in a Steeplechase of no less than three miles at some time during their career. Finishing well in a typical three-mile steeplechase, however, is no guarantee that a horse is able to meet the very special demands of the Grand National.

While the minimum rating of entrants has now also been raised, from 110 to 120, the British Horseracing Authority itself admits that this will make very little difference to a horse's ability to cope. This is because: 'In only one race since 2000 has a runner rated less than 120 taken part in the Grand National.'

Another issue relating to Grand National entrants has been the age requirement. In 1987, the minimum age of participating horses was increased from six to seven years, but this was reversed back to six in 1999 and back once more to seven for the 2012 race. These changes, however, have virtually no relevance given that very few six-year-olds have been entered into the race since 1999. Animal Aid is aware of no deaths from that age group in the race since that time.

A recent and significant increase in the number of runners

From the race's inception in 1839 through to 1999, the average number of runners was 29. The implementation, in 2000, of a set number of 40 runners represented an increase of some 38 per cent. The race organisers suggested that they set a maximum of 40 runners in the interests of safety, but this is not credible when the history of the race is considered.

In 2011, crowding and speed were important contributory factors in the early deaths of two horses – that of Ornaïs during the fast early pace of the race, and Dooneys Gate who was killed in a melee at Becher's Brook.

In November 2011, due to public outrage, changes were announced by the British Horseracing Authority to the structure of the course and to the rules governing which horses can take part. Though much trumpeted by pro-racing journalists, the changes failed to tackle the lethal nature of the event. Despite reducing the drop on the landing side of Becher's Brook, two horses were killed in the 2012 race following falls at the fence. The British Horseracing Authority and Aintree Racecourse had failed to deal with the issues of crowding and speed, both of which were contributory factors in the deaths of the Gold Cup winner Synchronised and the outsider According To Pete.

In September 2012, the BHA released details of further amendments, which, however, failed to reduce field size or remove Becher's Brook – key reasons why the race is so hazardous.

Inherently lethal

Animal Aid is against horse racing and views the Grand National race itself, and other races on the course, as abhorrent and considers that they should be banned. However, in the immediate future, further changes should be made because of the inherent dangers on the course in its design and race conditions. This would go some way to reducing the horse injury and death rates.

Reducing the risks:

- 1. Reduce the number of horses** who race from 40 to fewer than 30. The Grand National's mean number of runners from 1839 until 1999 was 29.
- 2. Remove the Starting Tape.** This would stop anxious horses becoming caught up in the tape. It would also stop repeated false starts (another cause of anxiety in horses) due to jockeys lining up too close to the tape. Since the 2013 race, the Starting Tape has been moved, but Animal Aid would still like to see it removed completely.
- 3. Remove Becher's Brook and Canal Turn Fences.** The dangers of the fences are evident. Despite changes over the years, no adjustment has had a significant impact on these fences' attrition rates.
- 4. Remove the drop element on fences.** The ground on the landing side of fences should never be lower than on the take-off side.
- 5. Reduce the distance of the race from four miles and a quarter.** The race distance has been shorter during its history and four miles maximum would still be stamina-sapping for any horse to race over.
- 6. Use outriders to catch loose horses who have become separated from the field.**
- 7. Withdraw horses who get loose before the start of the race.** Synchronised was loose minutes before the start of the 2012 Grand National. Despite reportedly having a veterinary inspection, both he and his fallen rider, AP McCoy, would have been shaken up, and this is likely to have had a negative effect during the race.

Less obvious problems

While the problems above are fairly clear to see, other aspects also require serious consideration.

- 1. Some jockeys have never previously ridden their Grand National mounts. This is not acceptable.**
- 2. Any jockey who is to ride a horse in the Grand National should have recently ridden and schooled that same horse in training or in another race.**
- 3. The number of fences per mile.** There is a greater number of fences on the Grand National course in relation to the race distance than on any other British NH racecourse.

Average number of fences in relation to distance raced on British racecourses: 2m Chase = 12 fences = 6 per mile

2m 4f Chase = 15 fences = 6 per mile

3m Chase = 18 fences = 6 per mile

3m 2.5f Chase = 22 fences Gold Cup Cheltenham = 6.64 per mile

4m Chase = 25 fences NH Chase Cheltenham = 6.25 per mile

4m 2f Chase = 30 fences Grand National Aintree = 9.06 per mile

If the Grand National course were to be brought in line with other racecourses, the horses would be confronted with a maximum of 26 fences.

4. Visual problems for the horses posed by fence design.

- Though horses do not see the same colours as humans, a padded coloured rail halfway up and all along the plain fences may deceive the horses into thinking that the rail is the top of the fence and so look to jump for that point. There is a coloured sight board for horses to judge the base of a fence. A sight line at the top of the fence would also be helpful, but not in the middle as is seen.
- All plain and ditch fences look to have a negative concave appearance to horses on their approach. This is accentuated on plain fences by the mid-height coloured rail, and on ditch fences by the open-ditch behind the coloured sight board. These are visual problems that will not allow horses to judge the fences' true positions. If all fences had a convex shape, this would help the horses to jump correctly.

The problems with Becher's Brook

Becher's Brook is the most lethal fence on the Grand National course. There are several reasons for this:

- A visual problem caused by the coloured rail halfway up and all along the fence
- Its position on the course – coming at the end of a fast straight after five demanding fences have been jumped
- Its angled position on approach
- The camber/drop element of the fence on landing
- The turn after it has been jumped. This fence's positioning is poor, with a left turn immediately after the fence is jumped. The fence is also angled and is not jumped head-on, as a normal fence would be.

Horses positioning at Becher's Brook fence

The vast majority of the jockeys guide their horses to the middle/nearside of Becher's Brook. After completing the jump, there is a turn. Few jockeys take the option of the right side of the fence when jumping.

Many horses corkscrew their hindquarters when jumping the fence, an example being the ill-fated Synchronised (the horse with the white blaze, centre, in the photographs below).



Conclusion

The Grand National is, by design, an extraordinarily challenging and dangerous race that routinely kills horses. Various changes have been made to the course over many years. These changes have failed to make racing on the course any safer. The evidence strongly suggests that the Grand National course will remain a death trap for horses unless the key features by which it is known – fences like Becher's Brook, Valentine's Brook, The Chair and Canal Turn – are removed. In addition, both the length of the race and the number of horses entered need to be significantly reduced. If these changes are made, the race would then become a typically hazardous jumps event that would still kill horses. Therefore, **a ban on jump (National Hunt) racing is needed to end most race horse deaths.**

Horse death statistics

Grand National Horse Fatalities since 2000

- 2002 **The Last Fling** – Fatal Fall / **Manx Magic** – Fatal Fall
2003 **Goguenard** – Fell – Injured. Destroyed
2006 **Tyneandthyneagain** – Injured. Destroyed
2007 **Graphic Approach** – Injured. Died later from complications
2008 **McKelvey** – Injured. Destroyed
2009 **Hear The Echo** – Collapsed. Died close to the finish line
2011 **Ornais** – Broke Neck / **Dooneys Gate** – Broke Back. Destroyed
2012 **Synchronised** – Broke Hind Leg. Destroyed / **According To Pete** – Broke Shoulder.
2019 **Up For Review** – Broke Neck
2021 **The Long Mile** – Broke Near-Hind Leg After Jumping Becher's Brook Fence
2022 **Eclair Surf** (FR) Fell - Died From Head Injuries / **Discorama (FR)** Pulled Up – Injured Pelvis – Destroyed

The Grand National meeting's horse deaths 2000 to 2022

Includes: Horses killed in the Grand National, horses killed in other races on the Grand National Course (GNC) and horses killed on the Mildmay Course

2022

Eclair Surf (FR) – GN – aged 8 – Fell - Died From Head Injuries
Discorama (FR) – GN – aged 9 – Pulled Up – Injured Pelvis – Destroyed
Elle Est Belle – Novice Hurdle – aged 6 – Collapsed During Race – Dead
Solwara One (IRE) – Hurdle – aged 8 – Pulled Up – Injured – Destroyed

2021

The Long Mile – GN – aged 7 – Broke Near-Hind Leg – Destroyed
Houx Gris – Novice Hurdle – aged 4 – Fell Ran Loose – Fatally Injured

2020 race meeting abandoned

2019

Up For Review – GN – aged 10 – Brought Down Broke Neck – Dead
Forest des Aigles – GNC – aged 8 – Broke Foreleg – Destroyed
Crucial Role – Novice Chase – aged 7 – Fell – Injured – Destroyed

2018

Lilbitluso – GNC – aged 10 – Fell Injured Destroyed

2017

No Deaths Recorded

2016:

Kings Palace – Hurdle – aged 8 – Pulled Up Lamé – Destroyed
Gullinbursti – GNC – aged 10 – Fell Broke Neck – Dead
Minella Reception – GNC – aged 10 – Fell – Dead
Marasonnien – GNC – aged 10 – Collapsed – Fatally Injured
Clonbanan Lad – GNC – aged 10 – Collapsed – Fatally Injured
Arzal – Novice Chase – aged 6 – Injured – Destroyed

2015:

Balder Success – Chase – aged 7 – Fell – Injured Shoulder – Destroyed
Seedling – Novice Hurdle – aged 6 – Fell – Broke Neck – Dead

2014

No Deaths Recorded

2013

Little Josh – GNC – aged 11 – Fell Broke Shoulder – Destroyed
Battlefront – GNC – aged 11 – Collapsed and Fatally Injured

2012

According To Pete – GN – aged 11 – Brought Down – Broke Leg – Destroyed
Synchronised – GN – aged 9 – Fell – Broke Leg Running Loose – Destroyed
Gottony O'S – Hurdle – aged 4 – Fractured Right Foreleg – Destroyed

2011

Leo's Lucky Star – Chase - aged 9 – Injured Destroyed
Inventor – Hurdle – aged 6 – Injured Destroyed
Dooneys Gate – GN - aged 10 – broke back
Ornais – GN – aged 9 – broke neck
Bible Lord – GNC – aged 10 – Injured Spine Destroyed Months Later

2010

Baba O'Curragh – National Hunt Flat – aged 4 – Knee Injury Destroyed
Pagan Starprincess – Hurdle – aged 6 – Head Injury Killed Instantly
Plaisir D'Estival – GNC – aged 7 – Broke Neck
Prudent Honour – GNC – aged 8 – Broke Neck
Schindlers Hunt – Chase – aged 10 – Broke Foreleg Destroyed

2009

Hear The Echo – GN – aged 8 – Collapsed & Died
Mel In Blue – GNC – aged 11 – Broke Neck
Exotic Dancer – Chase – aged 9 - Collapsed & Died
Moscow Catch – Novice Hurdle – aged 6 – Broke Neck
Lilla Sophia – National Hunt Flat – aged 4 – Broke Leg Destroyed

2008

McKelvey – GN – aged 8 – Injured Destroyed
In The High Grass – GNC – aged 7 – Fatal Fall
Time To Sell – GNC - aged 9 – Fatal Fall

2007

Graphic Approach – GN – aged 9 – Injured / Later Complications PTS
Lord Rodney - GNC – aged 8 – Brought Down Injured Destroyed
Into The Shadows–Hurdle – aged 7 – Internal Haemorrhage During Race

2006

Tyneandthyeagain – GN – aged 11 - Injured Destroyed
Terivic – GNC – aged 6 – Fatal Fall

2005

Lilium De Cotte – Hurdle - aged 6 – Internal Haemorrhage During Race

2004

No Deaths Recorded

2003

Goguenard – GN–aged 9 – Injured Destroyed
Coolnagorna – Novice Hurdle – aged 6 – Broke Hind Leg – Destroyed

2002

The Last Fling – GN – aged 12 – Fatal Fall
Manx Magic – GN – aged 9 – Fatal Fall
Anubis Quercus – GNC – aged 9 – Fatal Fall
Desert Mountain - Chase – aged 9 – Fatal Fall

2001

The Outback Way – GNC – aged 11 – Brought Down – Spinal Injuries Destroyed

2000

Toni's Tip – GNC – aged 8 – Fatal Fall
Rossell Island – GNC – aged 9 – Fatal Fall
Strong Promise – Chase – aged 9 – Fatal Fall
Lake Kariba – Chase – aged 9 – Collapsed & Died
Architect – Novice Hurdle – aged 4 – Fatal Fall

Key

Horses killed on the Aintree Grand National Course:

GN – Grand National (the race itself)

GNC – Grand National Course (horses killed not in the Grand National race itself, but in other races over the same course)

Horses killed on the Aintree Mildmay Racecourse in a specific type of race:

A **Hurdle** race

A **Chase** race

A **Novice Hurdle** race

A **Novice Chase** race

A **National Hunt Flat** race

Mildmay Racecourse at Aintree

Aintree also boasts the Mildmay course, on which several jumps races are run during the three-day April meeting. It is much smaller in circumference than the Grand National course and has traditional fences and hurdles.

More races take place on the Mildmay than on the Grand National course itself. Fatalities occur routinely.

The chart below highlights the dangers of racing on the Mildmay racecourse at Aintree alongside that of the Grand National Course:

Chart: Breakdown of Deaths at the three-day Aintree Grand National Meetings 2000 to 2022

Year	GN Race	GN Meeting Course Foxhunters / Topham	Mildmay Chase / Hurdle / NHF	Total
2000	0	2	3	5
2001	0	1	0	1
2002	2	1	1	4
2003	1	0	1	2
2004	0	0	0	0
2005	0	0	1	1
2006	1	1	0	2
2007	1	1	1	3
2008	1	2	0	3
2009	1	1	3	5
2010	0	2	3	5
2011	2	1	2	5
2012	2	0	1	3
2013	0	2	0	2
2014	0	0	0	0
2015	0	0	2	2
2016	0	4	2	6
2017	0	0	0	0
2018	0	1	0	1
2019	1	1	1	3
2020	No Race	No Races	No Races	0
2021	1	0	1	2
2022	2	0	2	4
Total	15	20	24	59

Additional Information

Races are held on the Grand National Course during the Grand National Meeting; in addition, there are two races run in the winter months. Races run over the Grand National Course are the Grand National, the Foxhunters' Chase, the Topham Chase, the Grand Sefton Chase and the Becher Chase.

Chart: Deaths on the Grand National Course 2000 to 2022 NB Grand Sefton Chase re-run from 2003

Year	GN Race	GN Course - GN Meeting Foxhunters/ Topham	GN Course - Nov/Dec Meeting Becher/Sefton	Total
2000	0	2	0	2
2001	0	1	0	1
2002	2	1	0	3
2003	1	0	0	1
2004	0	0	0	0
2005	0	0	0	0
2006	1	1	0	2
2007	1	1	0	2
2008	1	2	0	3
2009	1	1	0	2
2010	0	2	1	3
2011	2	1	0	3
2012	2	0	0	2
2013	0	2	1	3
2014	0	0	1	1
2015	0	0	0	0
2016	0	4	0	4
2017	0	0	0	0
2018	0	1	0	1
2019	1	1	1	3
2020	No Race	No Races	1	1
2021	1	0	0	1
2022	2	0	0	2
Total	15	20	5	40

End