



Ban National Hunt (Jump) Racing

Briefing Document

'Nuts Well was taken to the veterinary practice near Stokely in North Yorkshire after falling heavily at the last fence in the 2m 3½f handicap chase on the opening day of the Charlie Hall meeting [Wetherby]... but unfortunately he suffered severe facial injuries.

"We took him to Hambleton Equine Clinic... they x-rayed him and halfway down his face to his nose, all the bones were shattered," said Ian Hamilton [Owner] ¹

Summary

Severe and fatal injuries to horses are an everyday occurrence in National Hunt (jump) racing. This sport kills more than 150 horses annually in Britain, equating to approximately 1 in every 58 National Hunt horses being killed in a season.²

Those responsible for horse welfare have failed to take constructive action to stop horse deaths and injury.

A strong case can be made to call for an end to National Hunt racing on the grounds of animal suffering, as set out in the Animal Welfare Act of 2006.

Animal Aid is leading the call for a ban on National Hunt racing.

Introduction

If one compares the dangers to horses in the racing industry, jump racing is clearly the most deadly.

The destruction of vast numbers of horses who were bred and conscripted into racing for the pursuit of profit is unacceptable. Destruction occurs when horses have physically broken down during a race because they have been pushed beyond their capabilities, and nothing exemplifies this more than National Hunt (jump) racing.

Background

National Hunt racing may be an integral part of British racing, but on an international scale it is a minor sport, with only Britain, Ireland and France as the key participants.

Historically, National Hunt racing had little connection with Flat racing in Britain, and it was regulated by a separate organisation, the National Hunt Committee, with its roots firmly entrenched within the hunting fraternity. When the Jockey Club took over its regulation (now the British Horseracing Authority), it increased its association with a wider public audience whilst still maintaining its strong connection with hunting.

Jump racing is demanding; its lucrative and competitive framework pushes horses to their physical and mental limits. This comes at a cost, with premature death commonplace. Through in-depth analysis, Animal Aid estimates that each year 1 in 58 horses who race over jumps will suffer a life-ending injury.

Welfare regulation

*'...the rider of **Elmaftun** (IRE), had continued in the race when it was contrary to the horse's welfare, after becoming detached... falling at the second last hurdle... the gelding remained prone for a considerable period of time but had got back to its feet following veterinary treatment... [the jockey] had failed to pull up **Elmaftun** (IRE) when it had no more to give and was tailed off through fatigue.'*³

The British Horseracing Authority (BHA) is the independent, government-recognised body 'responsible for governance, administration and regulation in racing', as well as the promotion of racing. It has a remit to regulate race horse welfare.⁴ Responsibility for horses' safety also lies with its subsidiary Horse Welfare Board, along with the Racecourse Association and the Thoroughbred Group. There is also an individual duty of care from trainers, owners and jockeys.

However, the welfare policy is, in essence, subjective, with its own defined parameters of equine health and safety. The results are abject failings: repeated equine death and injury.

Standing in the way of change is a lack of intent and intervention from Parliament. The BHA has a powerful voice within the two Westminster Houses, e.g. Rishi Sunak opened a new £3.5million building at Catterick Racecourse in 2021.⁴ The industry is supported by the strong and vocal 'All Party Parliamentary Group for the Racing and Bloodstock Industries'.

Both the BHA and Parliamentarians were tested in 2018 when the BHA's welfare role was challenged in a Westminster debate, which resulted from a public e-petition, launched by Animal Aid, with over 100,000 signatures, demanding truly independent horse welfare regulation. Its aim was to replace the BHA with a body with no vested commercial racing interests. Promises made by politicians and the racing industry to bring down horse deaths, without the BHA losing its self-appointed welfare role, proved over time to be lame.

The reasons why horses are injured and killed in jump racing

*'Deep into a Thursday night... whilst the [Cheltenham] Festival's punters snoozed in their hotel beds, not far away at an equine hospital, eight-year-old race horse **Sh Boom** was fighting for his life. He'd been gouged whilst jumping a hurdle in the 3.15 race that afternoon. His injuries were so severe that the veterinary profession was helpless to relieve his pain. The young **Sh Boom's** life ebbed away that night.'*⁵

The racing industry's public statistics on horse deaths are crude, blunt and far from accurate.

The BHA is keen to express deaths in terms of *minimal percentages* of 'deaths-to-runs' rather than a ratio of 'deaths-to-horses'. In further minimising the figures, they currently *do not* include horses who are destroyed off the racecourse more than 48 hours after suffering a racing injury or horses killed by 'elective euthanasia'. The cause of death is rarely made public. This huge gap in meaningful data highlights a fundamental failing.

With every stride that a horse takes when running on a racecourse, there is potential for injury. Horses' lives end in the split seconds of a race when they fall, break a leg or have a heart attack due to fatigue.

Putting obstacles in horses' paths effectively triples fatal risk factors when compared to flat racing.⁶ The obstacles are either hurdles or fences, which vary in form. The idea is to clear the obstacles at speed. but the reality is that when hit or overjumped or the horse is tiring, they can cause a horse to fall. It is down to luck whether a horse survives a fall.

Severe musculoskeletal injuries from a fall are horrific and varied: leg bones snap; pelvic girdles lose support; spinal fractures leave horses lying paralysed waiting either for a bullet or a needle to end their lives; broken necks from rotational falls see horses suffer repetitive and violent convulsions as life drains from them. All of this the racecourse wants hidden behind their huge, dark screens.

Horses in jump racing carry much heavier weights than horses running on the flat, and the majority of them race over much further distances. The burden of excessive weight bearing on their backs (over 12 stone – 76kg – is not uncommon; a combination of the jockey's weight and deadweight in the saddle) takes its toll on the musculoskeletal and cardiovascular systems. Horses can suffer heart attacks whilst racing or after the finish line. There is usually a wobble from the horse with uncoordinated leg and neck movements then they drop down – dead.

In 2022, the BHA increased the weights most horses are forced to carry in races by 3lb (1.4kg). This backward step can only have a negative effect on a horse's wellbeing.

The obstacles and weight are not the only factors of concern. The state of the racing ground can have a welfare impact upon horses. Whilst racecourses aim for Good or Good to Soft Ground as the optimal racing surface, that is not always possible. Rain can leave many courses with 'Heavy' ground conditions, making the ground deeper and harder to jump from, whilst a dry spell can leave the ground Good to Firm, which can jar a horse.

Supporting scientific evidence

There has been a host of scientific research papers published on the subject of jump racing.

For example, a paper published in 2004 entitled, '**A prospective cohort study to investigate risk factors for horse falls in UK hurdle and steeplechase racing**',⁷ stated the reasons for the study: '*Equine fatalities during racing continue to be a major welfare concern and falls at fences are responsible for a proportion of all equine fatalities recorded on racecourses.*' It concluded that, '*Falls at fences are significant contributors to equine fatalities during National Hunt racing.*' The authors outlined the potential relevance of their study: '*It is hoped that information from this study may be used in future interventions to improve horse and jockey safety in racing.*' The in-depth study took two years to complete.

After this was brought to the attention of racing's welfare regulator in 2004, their lack of any meaningful action failed horses on a massive scale. Alarming, it has cost the lives of an estimated 3,000 National Hunt race horses.

Australia – taking the reins and setting the pace in banning jump racing

In July 2022, South Australia under its Animal Welfare Act banned jump racing in the state. This follows the outlawing of the sport in New South Wales. Victoria remains the only state in Australia to hold jump racing and even that is at a bare minimum.⁸

Racing's regulators across the world need to understand that progressive horse welfare improvements are essential to keep abreast of public opinion – which calls for change. If they fail to do so, their public licence to operate will come under increasing scrutiny, as seen in Australia.

Conclusion

In National Hunt racing, horse welfare is violated to the extreme. Immense suffering is caused to horses. This warrants a complete ban.

Appendices

¹ Racing Post online 31 Oct 2022

² [Horse welfare in British racing - The British Horseracing Authority](https://www.ifhaonline.org/Default.asp?section=Resources&area=4) in conjunction with <https://www.ifhaonline.org/Default.asp?section=Resources&area=4>

³ <https://www.britishhorseracing.com/racing/stewards-reports/#!?q=Elmaftun>

⁴ <https://www.britishhorseracing.com/about/the-bha/what-we-do/>

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dene-stansall/blood-and-sweat-and-tears_b_15241644.html

⁶ [Race Horse Death Watch](#) also [Horse welfare in British racing - The British Horseracing Authority](https://www.britishhorseracing.com/racing/stewards-reports/#!?q=Elmaftun)

⁷ [A prospective cohort study to investigate risk factors for horse falls in UK hurdle and steeplechase racing - PubMed](#)

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-06/jumps-racing-to-be-banned-in-south-australia/101214142>