

A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

1

by Amanda Kowalczyk

Thoroughbred racing has been called “the sport of kings,” and a kingly sport is all that an outsider watching a race sees. There is an air of majesty in the power of the horses as they run, the old-fashioned wealth of the owners watching from their private seating, and the ecstasy of a victory, topped with a blanket of roses. The American nation has been enraptured by this sport for decades, and has hailed champions ranging from Secretariat the Superhorse, a famous triple crown winner, to the mighty Man O’ War, who only lost one race in his entire career. But few consider the fate of the horses who do not win races, those who are the victims of an increasingly horrible industry. It is difficult for outsiders to see that a greedy system hides behind the façade of glory; a system filled with trainers who will do anything to make a champion.

A Jockey Club study determined that 2.04 horses die every 1,000 races (Drape B.16.). In real numbers, this comes to 700 to 800 racehorses put down every year due to injuries sustained while racing. It has been concluded that many of these deaths are not caused by a single, massive injury, but instead by numerous small injuries that are left untreated. (Hodges n.p.). Due to specialized breeding, thoroughbreds are especially prone to leg injuries. Thin, fragile legs are a desired trait in racehorses because they help the horses break out of the starting gate faster. Thin-boned thoroughbreds are bred together to produce foals with even thinner leg bones who can run even faster, and are even more prone to injury (Lubrano A1+). Unfortunately, since trainers are under so much pressure to make money, they give horses with minor injuries a shot of cortisone to mask the pain so they can run, which leads to races full of injured horses who could worsen their injuries with every stride they take (Hodges n.p.). Other drugs, like butazolidin, that are used to get unfit racehorses on the track, are meant to be given to

A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

2

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horses in conjunction with rest, not as a substitute for it. Butazolidin and drugs like it soothe the pain of an injury, which fools a horse to the point that he will run until he has injured himself beyond repair (Maggitti 18-24). The businessmen in the industry see the horses lost due to injuries as collateral damage in the pursuit of a winning horse, and they do nothing to minimize or prevent these deaths.

The damage due to drugs starts when thoroughbreds are weaned. Steroids are used to make young horses more muscular and visually appealing to buyers so they will fetch a higher price, but these horses have very little bone and an overabundance of muscle putting pressure on their legs (Finley D1+). These poorly balanced horses are then trained and sent to the track when they turn two years old, long before their bones are fully developed and able to handle racing stress (Lubrano A1+). It is not surprising that most of them are riddled with injuries by the time they are four or five.

When racehorses get too injured or too old to race, or if they aren't winning races, they are sent to auctions where many are bought to be slaughtered. There is the possibility for some thoroughbreds to be bought by people who want a horse to jump, or a horse for polo, but it is generally believed that, due to the way racehorses are trained, it is too difficult to retrain them to do anything other than run in circles. Horses that could have been sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars at one point in their lives are sold for only hundreds to a killer buyer who will take them on a long journey to Canada or Mexico on a cramped trailer. All that awaits them there is a factory that will grind them up and ship them to other parts of the world where people will eat them (Maese "Thoroughbreds" n.p.). For all of the hard work they have done in their lives, even if they haven't won races, it would seem that racehorses deserve a better end than this one.

A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

3

by Amanda Kowalczyk

It isn't only the losing horses and those that are unfit to race who go to auction. Ferdinand won the Kentucky Derby in 1986, was named Horse of the Year in 1987, and was killed in a slaughterhouse in Japan in 2002. In his career, Ferdinand won \$3,777,978, but even that huge sum couldn't protect him. Despite all of his achievements and the money he made, when he didn't produce champion offspring, he was killed (Paulick n.p.). Another champion horse named Exceller won \$1.6 million in his career. He was killed in a Swedish slaughterhouse in 1997 (Maese "Thoroughbreds" n.p.). This is the fate of racehorses who stop making money for their owners, no matter how much they might have won in the past. And still, those who claim that horse slaughter is a necessary process defend it, saying that the only horses who are slaughtered are those who are sick or injured beyond repair, and that it isn't financially worth it to slaughter a healthy, sane horse (Maese "Horse" n.p.). The truth is, the racing industry produces an overabundance of thoroughbreds in its search for a champion. 33,000 new foals are registered with the Jockey Club each year, and not every one will be a winner (Maese "Thoroughbreds" n.p.). The excess horses, which could have successful lives outside of the racing industry, are sent to auction, where no one wants to bid on a thoroughbred except the killer buyers.

The way that the racehorse industry works has gotten way out of hand, with little to no concern being given to the horses themselves. The vicious circle of a horse becoming injured and given drugs so he can run, and then becoming more injured from running and given even more drugs, is seen far too often. However, the racing industry is completely against banning drugs from races. A ban on drugs has already been tried, and failed, with the ban lifted almost immediately due to protests from the racing world

A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

4

by Amanda Kowalczyk

(Maggitti 18-24). The only solution to this problem would be to kill it at its source by making racehorses less fragile. To add thickness to thoroughbred leg bones, a warmblood breed should be mandated to be in the pedigree of all thoroughbred foals conceived within a few specified years, with the mandate repeated every thirty years or so to preserve the warmblood traits. The big warmblood breeds like Dutch warmbloods are perfect for this because, not only do they have thicker leg bones, but they are also famously even-tempered and versatile (“Warmbloods” n.p.). Their contribution of thicker bones would make the thoroughbred breed sturdier, and the extra plus of adding a calmer temperament and more athletic versatility would make it more likely that people would buy an ex-racehorse.

The only plausible solution to the problem of thoroughbreds being slaughtered is people outside of the racing industry buying them. The addition of warmblood genes to the gene pool will make thoroughbreds a more attractive option to horse buyers, and the creation of horse shows specifically for thoroughbreds would make even more people want to buy them. The shows would have special classes for off the track thoroughbreds, as well as jumping and dressage classes, and classes for thoroughbreds at different points in training. Judging would completely disregard any conformation faults on the legs that could have been caused by injuries from racing to prevent buyers overlooking a racehorse because of these minor faults. Eventually, these shows would pick up enough interest that they would pay for themselves, but initial funding would come from the racing industry, where many racetracks have anti-slaughter policies. The owners and trainers in the industry would also support the idea, because they would make more money selling retired racehorses to private buyers than they do selling them to killer buyers (Maese

A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

5

by Amanda Kowalczyk

“Horse” n.p.). The solution to keeping racehorses from slaughter comes down to creating a public that wants to buy thoroughbreds after they are done racing.

The old legacy of racehorses is gone. Thoroughbreds today are a shadow of what the breed used to be, and statistics show that things are only getting worse. Change is the only way to salvage the industry, and although many will protest, there will be many more who accept that change is necessary. Racing will not be the same as it was fifty years ago, and, in truth, racing today is not the same as it was in the past. There is no way to bring back that glory; there is only the future. These solutions will not be the destruction of the thoroughbred, as some will say; they will be the redefining of the breed as a multi-purpose horse who lives a long, fulfilling life and dies of old age, comfortable in his stall.

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A Dying Legacy: Thoroughbred Racing

8

by Amanda Kowalczyk

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