



Born to Run

Noemie Emery

Like dogs, horses have forged a unique bond with human beings that goes back into our early history, based on mutual interest and love. Unlike livestock, neither dogs nor horses are farmed in the United States for the purpose of eating, and unlike other pets, such as birds, goldfish, and housecats, each has genuine, practical, use. Where dogs have served as guards, hunting partners, herders, searchers, guides, and trained therapeutic companions, horses for millennia were beasts of burden, tugging loads and plows, pulling wagons and coaches, carrying men into battle and dying with them in war.

These uses have produced a transactional system: the animals provide us their labor and we provide them with food, shelter, and medical care. Moreover, familiarity and our admiration for the special qualities of dogs and horses have led us to develop deep relationships with them: we give them names, talk to them, grieve when they die. We breed, raise, and train them: there are dog and horse shows in which they, and we, can win ribbons. The big difference is that while your dog will never win you millions of dollars, there is a chance that a horse of yours will. A small chance, but a chance nonetheless; and this chance has created a sport and an industry—much more profitable with horses on the track than with dogs—that gives entertainment to millions of people, and a living, sumptuous or otherwise, to a smaller number.

The difficult ethical questions surrounding this practice have been receiving greater attention in recent years. Horses born into the racing life are enlisted in an enterprise they have not chosen, have no control over, and in which they may well be injured or die. Are we right to conscript horses into this life?

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WINTER/SPRING 2013 ~ 71

Couldn't Drag Them Away

In considering the ethics of the sport, the first question we must ask is: Do horses like racing? Laura Hillenbrand, author of the epic 2001 best-seller *Seabiscuit*, argues that they do—that they love running, are fiercely competitive, and would race with each other, with us or without. “Horses who lose their riders during races almost always try to win anyway, charging to the lead and sometimes bucking with pleasure as they pass the last opponent,” she tells us. “Weanling herds stampede around their paddocks several times a day, running all-out to beat one another. Even old stallions, decades away from the track, still duel with one another up and down the fences of breeding farms.” Hillenbrand notes that *Seabiscuit*'s occasional rider, the great jockey George Woolf, observed how “losers show clear signs of dejection and frustration, even shame; winners prick their ears and swagger.” “You don't have to tell good horses when they win or lose,” Woolf said. “They know.”

Seabiscuit behaved as if he knew—and knew, moreover, that he was a celebrity. He turned his head in the direction of cameras, striking a noble pose when he saw a photographer, relaxing when the shutter clicked. Horses may not know how a camera works, but they do seem to sense that it means they're important: “When Giacomo heard those cameras click, his ears would prick and his eyes would get bright. He loved it,” trainer John Shirreffs told *The Blood-Horse* magazine of his surprise Derby winner. *Zenyatta* did a signature dance in the post-parade for her many admirers, leading her fans to erupt in a frenzy. In a documentary about Secretariat, one of his exercise riders insisted that after each loss, the horse would go to the back of his stall to “think,” and in the next race would set a track record. “He expected to win,” said Penny Chenery, Secretariat's owner, and “had taken his career entirely into his own hands.”

Many horses not only respond to their fans, but come to bond strongly with their connections—the racing term for the rider, owner, trainers, and other people directly involved with the horse—making their careers a sort of partnership. After troubled relations with his early connections, *Seabiscuit* became deeply attached to the people who saved him: his owner, Charles Howard, his main jockey, Red Pollard, and his trainer, Tom Smith. “When he heard Pollard's deep voice...he would poke his head over the half door to greet him,” Hillenbrand explains. “When Smith led him out...the horse would follow his trainer wherever he went, nuzzling his pockets. Smith spoke to the horse in nearly inaudible tones, calling him Son, and touching him lightly when he needed him to turn. *Seabiscuit* understood him and

always did as asked. In moments of uncertainty, the horse would pause and look for Smith. When he found his trainer, the horse would relax.”

Connections sometimes refer to their horses as children and become distraught when something goes horribly wrong, as was trainer Larry Jones after Eight Belles broke down and had to be euthanized on the track in the Kentucky Derby. She had finished second to the winner, Big Brown. After Barbaro’s injury in the 2006 Preakness, his owners and trainers unsuccessfully fought for his life—a heartbreak in which much of the public shared via intense media coverage. In 2012, when Paynter became desperately ill after winning the Grade I Haskell, the owner’s family grieved for months until the horse had begun to recover. “I just do not know how he survived,” Ahmed Zayat told *The Blood-Horse*. “I can’t explain it. I keep living this whole ordeal in my dreams. I’ve become so emotionally attached; it’s crazy. It’s like I’m obsessed.”

The people involved in racing describe horses as enjoying not only the sport itself, but the life that surrounds it—the people, the other horses, the constant commotion, the various animals that seem to accrue. Seabiscuit befriended a dog, a monkey, his brother Grog, and the yellow horse Pumpkin, who remained his lifelong companion.

Buoyed by the excitement, attention, and care of their fans and connections, some horses get used to the life of the racetrack, even seeming to pine for it when they leave, as did the California celebrity Lava Man, the winner of several highly competitive races. Retired in 2008, the gelding seemed miserable. Steve Haskin of *The Blood-Horse* reports that Lava Man had been retired to “a small farm and all those around him stated emphatically that he hated it. The sedentary life wasn’t for him. He wanted and needed the action and excitement of the racetrack.” Returned to his old trainer, he became a lead pony—that is, he was entrusted with accompanying racehorses up to the starting gate, including Derby and Preakness winner I’ll Have Another. Lava Man was soon applauded as much as his charges, and he basked in the praise and the commotion. “The cheers that accompany his star pupil,” the article continues, “are always within ear shot, and Lava Man has no reason to believe they are not meant for him.” Many other retired horses become lead ponies—a sort of second career for geldings who cannot occupy themselves in producing the next generation but do not want a quiet retirement.

There is a risk, of course, of overstating the ethical importance of horses’ behavior, and of unduly reading humanlike emotions into animals who cannot communicate their inner lives to us verbally. But the idea that horseracing is essentially the same thing as bullfighting, as the *New York*

Times sports columnist William C. Rhoden claimed in 2008, seems wrong-headed. Horses are born to run. And whereas the relationship between the human and the bull in bullfighting is intrinsically adversarial and brutal, the aims of the human rider and the racing horse are basically aligned.

Beyond the basic signs of compassion exhibited by riders toward their horses, it is widely known that the two can share a sophisticated capacity for nonverbal communication. Riders describe well-trained horses as having a kind of extrasensory perception for discerning their intentions. Most of this communication is in fact tactile, as Oregon State University psychologist Carol A. Saslow describes in a 2002 article in the journal *Applied Animal Behavior Science*. She notes that horses, which have relatively poor vision, may use touch to aid in object identification, and that, as with other mammals, tactile contact induces relaxation and helps to form bonds. Although riders knowingly direct horses using touch, Saslow notes that the parts of a horse's body in contact with a rider's legs are more sensitive than the human fingertip, so that horses may in fact be responsive to "slight movements or tightenings of muscles that the rider makes without awareness." One of the themes of the book and movie about *Seabiscuit* is that Tom Smith and Red Pollard (the trainer and jockey) understood the horse and how to approach him because all three had suffered loss or displacement in earlier years. Beyond the deeply symbiotic relationship between humankind and horsekind, beyond even the friendship that particular horses and human beings share, there can be a partnership of intense intimacy, a union of bodies and wills.

The Dangers of Racing

A horse on the top rungs of racing can live a charmed life, going from the breeding farm to the barn of a top trainer, then back to a farm some years later to produce the next generation and bask in the adoration of fans. But most artists starve, most actors wait tables, and many horses and horsemen compete in races where money is short, accidents frequent, rules broken, and few questions asked. "On average, 24 horses die each week at racetracks across America," according to a recent exposé in the *New York Times*. "Many are inexpensive horses racing with little regulatory protection in pursuit of bigger and bigger prizes. These deaths often go unexamined, the bodies shipped to rendering plants and landfills rather than to pathologists who might have discovered why the horses broke down." Tracks near the Mexican border are especially notorious. Where life is cheap, it is treated accordingly.

Even in the barns of good trainers, some horses can fall through the cracks. As Laura Hillenbrand writes in *Seabiscuit*, that legendary horse's life straddles both ends of the equine experience: Misunderstood by his original trainer, he was overworked, racing thirty-five times as a two-year-old—more than three times the normal amount. When he was saved half a year later, he was a miserable animal—sore, undernourished, and chronically angry—whose problems, mental and physical, took much time and care to treat. But his new trainer built him up, coaxed out and unwound his neuroses, and turned him into a star who flourished and enjoyed great glory during his remaining four years on the track. His last ten-plus years of life were wonderfully happy, from his final years on the track to an idyllic retirement. He was Cinderella, if Cinderella were a racehorse.

But the glass slipper, alas, comes to too few. And there is no denying that racing is dangerous, to horses and riders alike. We all know that football players get hurt routinely. But a 250-pound man is nothing compared to a 1,000-plus-pound mass of muscle, hurtling at forty miles an hour, who can dump a man on the tracks, step or fall on him, or roll over and crush him (as happened to one of Seabiscuit's jockeys). It almost seems as if nature designed horses as accidents waiting to happen: with the weight of that rippling muscle balanced on four slender legs—and with no muscle below the knee in the forelegs, or its equivalent, the hock, in the hind legs—horses are built to break fast and heal badly, as they cannot lie down for long stretches. They have to stand and be constantly moving. And if they put too much weight on one leg, the opposite leg can contract laminitis (the disease that killed Barbaro), an exceedingly painful breakdown of hoof tissue. In the wild, an injured horse is likely to go lame and die of hunger or thirst, or be eaten by predators. In racing, when medical care is deemed useless and suffering is obvious, injured horses are euthanized.

Breakdowns have occurred in all of the major races. Among the worst days was October 28, 1990, when three top-stakes horses died within hours—two in the Breeders' Cup Sprint, when one shattered his spine falling over another who collapsed of a heart attack; and the third an hour later, when the filly Go For Wand broke her ankle a hundred yards away from winning the Breeders' Cup Distaff, tried to get up, staggered horribly, and was then put to death on the spot. In 2007, the racehorse George Washington died in the muck in the Breeders' Cup Classic. Nothing could save Barbaro, who died eight months after his breakdown in the Preakness in 2006. The Kentucky Derby had been catastrophe-free until 2008, when Eight Belles broke both ankles while galloping out and was euthanized before her stunned trainer could get to her side.

While the press pays occasional attention to the injuries that racehorses suffer, the public typically does not hear as much about the care, including preventive care, that horses receive. Many horses, especially in the more prominent races, are scratched only hours beforehand when even minor physical problems are found. In three consecutive years, from 2009 through 2011, the favorite of the Kentucky Derby—I Want Revenge, Eskendereya, and Uncle Mo, respectively—was scratched days or hours before the race. And in 2012, I'll Have Another, who had won both the Derby and Preakness that year, was scratched the day before the Belmont, just as he was about to embark on his Triple Crown bid. In the major races, ambulances follow the field around the track, ready to van horses off at the first sign of trouble, taking them to state-of-the-art equine hospitals at which fortunes are spent to effect a recovery. The stallion Charismatic broke a front leg in the Belmont Stakes in 1989, and had his life saved when his jockey jumped off and held the leg off the ground, preventing further injury.

Racing horses are also often injured off the track—in their stalls, in paddocks, in the course of routine and non-strenuous workouts, and while doing nothing at all. In 2006, the previous year's Eclipse Award Horse of the Year, Saint Liam, then in retirement, broke his hind leg while being led to his paddock, and was euthanized later that day. Horses routinely suffer career-ending accidents in everyday workouts. At the age of two, Smarty Jones nearly killed himself when he cracked his skull on the gate of his stall.

Troublingly, reports indicate that the fatality rates for racing horses are on the rise, with the equine medical director of the California Horse Racing Board estimating a 30 to 40 percent increase over the past two decades. The *New York Times* attributes much of the recent rise in injuries and deaths in lower-echelon races to the addition of casino gambling to racetracks—establishments known as “racinos.” Struggling racetracks receive needed revenue from the casinos, but these tracks seem to be turning into the venue of choice to race weak or injured horses who should not be run in the first place. The *Times* also details the extensive use of performance-enhancing drugs, including anabolic steroids, stimulants, Viagra, and even cocaine—practices that are mostly illegal but weakly enforced.

Thoroughbreeding to Excess

Every year, tens of thousands of thoroughbred foals—the kind of horse bred for racing—are born in this country through carefully planned matings. Though a female bears only one foal a season, an in-demand stallion can produce a hundred offspring per year. While the number of

thoroughbreds born annually in the United States has been in decline in recent years, down from around 35,000 in 2005 to 22,500 in 2012, no more than twenty of those tens of thousands of horses make it to the starting gate at the Kentucky Derby, and only a hundred or so out of all of the racers become true money-winners, leaving many superfluous horses with no career or profession and no ready means of support.

“In the best of all possible worlds, every yearling offered” for sale at the world’s largest thoroughbred auction house “would find a buyer, race productively, then go to stud or to pampered retirement and a possible second career. But the real world doesn’t work that way,” said a 2010 article in *The Blood-Horse*. Although there is a lack of accurate and comprehensive data about the number of unwanted horses in the United States, the article cites a widely repeated estimate that nearly a hundred thousand horses are shipped every year from the United States to slaughterhouses in Canada and Mexico.

To be sure, the majority of unwanted horses are not thoroughbreds, and so do not come from racing. But racing, with its old runners, unsuccessful runners, and young horses who are not bought at auction, swells and feeds into their ranks. Slaughter as the answer to the problem of superfluous horses is truly the dark side of racing—the sport’s collateral damage. In the human sports and arts, many more fail than succeed in their ambitions and wishes, with years lost and hearts broken, but people contrive to find jobs, make other careers, and support themselves. Horses, alas, do not have this option, and are forced to depend on the kindness of strangers, who may be “kill buyers” contracted by a trainer on the lower levels of racing who has been told by the owner to dispose of a horse. The next stop is a horse auction, or a shuttle to a feedlot in New Mexico or Arizona, followed by shipment out of the country, where the slaughterhouse waits.

Why do we produce all these thoroughbreds in profusion, when only some reach the stardom for which they are bred? Because breeding and genetics are still inexact sciences; they go only so far. This uncertainty, of course, can also turn out for the better. In 2001, a colt was born to two sprinters, themselves offspring of sprinters, and was therefore dismissed from the start as lacking the stamina for the Triple Crown races. This colt was Smarty Jones—who had no trouble winning the 1¼-mile Kentucky Derby, almost won the 1½-mile Belmont, and set a race record by winning the 1⅜-mile Preakness by almost twelve lengths. After he won \$7 million in six months of the 2004 season, a breeder paid \$5 million to purchase his mother, but her seven subsequent foals only won four minor races.

Smarty Jones's siblings were a big, costly disappointment, but not all breeders have such bad luck. Not long after Smarty Jones, a mare called Better Than Honour was the mother of the Belmont Stakes winner two years in a row—a colt called Jazil in 2006, and the filly Rags to Riches in 2007. In 2002, a mare called Set Them Free bore a colt who in 2005 won the Kentucky Derby with a run from the back of the pack in which he passed seventeen horses. In 2004, she bore another colt who in 2007 won the Santa Anita Derby, with a run from the back of the pack that was an eerie replay of his brother's big moment. The two horses shared a similar style of running (both were deep closers); were in the top tier, but not the top of it; took third place in a Triple Crown race that was not the Derby; finished in the top four of the Breeders' Cup Classic; and retired having earned a little over \$2 million each. The mother of the great champion Zenyatta now has a daughter, Eblouissante, who looks like Zenyatta, runs like Zenyatta, has now won her first two races, and has only seventeen to go before she matches her big sister.

History does repeat itself—but only sometimes, and no one knows when, or why. This fact complicates life for breeders of horses, who would like to produce only those needed to fill out the card for the season, but feel compelled to take as many chances as possible, not knowing when lightning will strike.

Wanted and Unwanted

Public revulsion at the practice of horse slaughter in America has been building for a decade—at least since word emerged that Ferdinand, who won the Kentucky Derby in 1986 and the Breeders' Cup Classic a year later, was sold in 1994 to a Japanese breeder, sold again to a slaughterhouse when his offspring did not turn a profit, and killed there in 2002. In 2005, an Unwanted Horse Summit was held in Washington, D.C., resulting in the creation of the Unwanted Horse Coalition, an organization dedicated to raising awareness about the issue. In 2008, the National Thoroughbred Racing Association formed a Safety and Integrity Alliance to standardize operations across America's racetracks. A slew of nonprofits, charities, and rescue organizations—such as the California Retirement Management Account, Day's End in Maryland, and the Kentucky Equine Humane Center—have been founded to provide fulfilling lives for unwanted and retired horses. They help to train horses as jumpers, for riding academies, for therapy centers, for sale to people who ride as a hobby, or to pension them off to retire on farms. And the scandal about

misabeled and adulterated meat unfolding in Europe as this essay goes to press is a reminder that the concern is shared by many other nations.

In September 2007, the last horse slaughterhouse in the United States was closed after a budget bill was passed forbidding the Department of Agriculture from providing funds to inspect horsemeat. According to one estimate, of the almost 3,000 horses who left the Del Mar racetrack since 2007, only five were found to have reached a kill buyer by 2011. “Most end up on a farm, living out their days pleasantly,” said Del Mar CEO Joe Harper. “I worry about the smaller tracks in other parts of the country, where they run a lot of cheap claimers. But the owners here are fairly well-to-do, and they understand the game.” More recently, the Jockey Club announced in late 2012 that thirteen breeding farms in Kentucky would give one quarter of their stud fees to aftercare charities, and that the club would increase its transaction fees so it could give an additional \$300,000. Numerous racetracks are earmarking funds on their own, and various other efforts have been announced in the last decade.

Unfortunately, these positive developments are chiefly confined to the wealthy tracks that are most visible to the public eye but house only a minority of horses. A 2010 study in the *Journal of Animal Science* estimates that America’s equine-welfare associations have a maximum capacity of only 13,400 horses, not nearly enough for the number of thoroughbreds retired each year, let alone the estimated hundred thousand horses of all kinds who become unwanted annually. And although it may in part be a promising sign of growing awareness, a survey conducted in 2008–2009 of people involved in the horse industry showed that the vast majority of respondents (over 90 percent) believed that the number of unwanted horses was increasing; most of the respondents also reported believing that the problem had grown worse just over the three previous years.

Given the limited capacity for adopting horses, it is not surprising that the halting of horse slaughter in the United States in 2007 has resulted in a drastic increase in the export of horses to other countries for slaughtering. Because the prohibition on federal funding for horsemeat inspection has not been renewed since 2011, the Department of Agriculture seems, as of this writing, on the verge of approving a new horse slaughterhouse unless Congress moves quickly to prevent it.

The problem is that the number of horses overwhelms the current level of funds to care for them and the number of shelters now functioning. The sport has clearly made progress in recent years, but has failed to solve the inherent problem of the yearly production of thousands of horses for whom no real purpose exists. And even for the unwanted

horses who do not go to slaughter or adoption facilities, there is some evidence that their welfare is on the decline. A June 2011 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that “Horse welfare in the United States has generally declined since 2007, as evidenced by a reported increase in horse abandonments and an increase in investigations for horse abuse and neglect. The extent of the decline is unknown due to a lack of comprehensive, national data, but state officials attributed the decline in horse welfare...primarily to the cessation of domestic slaughter and the U.S. economic downturn.”

What We Owe

Horseracing is not intrinsically cruel. The problem is that some people involved in it are cruel—people who are improperly supervised, restrained, or punished—and more importantly, that even those who do treat their own animals kindly and responsibly are still neglecting their obligations to the enormous number of horses that are bred for racing but don’t make the cut. It is not inherently wrong to breed these animals, even in such large numbers, so long as those involved in horseracing fulfill their obligations to *all* of the lives they help to create, not just the lucky few winners.

Madeleine Auerbach, a prominent owner of racehorses and the founder of the California Retirement Management Account for retired horses, notes that animal-rights groups who want racing abolished misunderstand the nature of horses and the bonds they have formed with man throughout history. “Horses have driven civilization,” she says. “Next to the dog, the horse is man’s best friend.”

But we still have a long way to go toward treating horses even as close friends, despite the strides made in recent years. Man is an imperfect protector of some of his allies, but he must not forsake those who have shared the most with him. “Here are these exquisite, immensely powerful creatures, who willingly give us their labor in return for our stewardship,” Laura Hillenbrand tells us, correctly. “They have attended us throughout history, bearing us across frontiers and into battle, pulling our plows, thrilling us in sport, warming us with their beauty. We owe them more than we can ever repay.”