MARY SPRING

Mary Spring is a graduate of Yorkville High School. She currently serves on the civic association board in her hometown. Here at NIU, Mary is pursuing her degree in general studies while working in the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management and helping to implement sustainability programs. She was inspired to write her essay by widespread public ignorance about the mistreatment and abuse of racing horses. Mary hopes that her writing will help bring this cycle to an end.

Mary wrote this essay in Clare Foland's English 105 course during the fall of 2010.
The horse racing industry is marred by widespread misuse of the very animals it depends upon for its existence. Reform is needed in this business, “which has no central governing body or commissioner. There are competing organizations for racetracks, breeders, trainers, and jockeys” (Weinbach). Owners and trainers are tempted to resort to harmful practices, such as overworking young horses or even surgically straightening their legs, in an effort to make money or win races. Of course, there are dedicated owners, trainers, and others in the business who do not resort to mistreatment of horses to achieve these goals. However, there are still far too many who value money and the thrill of victory over the well-being of the animals.

One of the major factors in race-related injuries is that horses are raced before their skeletons are fully formed. Before the age of three, horses should only be trained and ridden lightly. “Over-racing immature two and three year old horses frequently causes bucked shins, osselets [bony lumps that form on the front of fetlock joints], and inflamed or filled soft tissues. To race a horse before it is ready or to race a horse in distances too far for its stage of training or for its inborn distance capacity can cause unsoundness” (Montgomery 365). The issue is not that young horses should not be trained or conditioned at all. In fact, it is essential to gradually build up strength and coordination during their physical development. Yet too many trainers rush the process and begin racing horses as young as two years old. It should also be noted that all horses are considered a year older as of January. Thus, a foal born in March 2010 would be referred to as a one-year-old in January 2011, even though its actual age would be ten months.

Another factor increasing the risk of injuries is the inhumane practice of allowing injured horses to race. One need not earn a degree in veterinary medicine to comprehend the harm being done to these horses for the sake of winning. “Racing a horse with injuries makes the horse run slightly off balance in order to protect the injured part, and this lack of balance leads to extra strain and stress on the joints and eventually causes lameness”
Even someone who knows nothing about equine anatomy instinctively understands the potential for serious damage when a horse with a leg injury is injected with drugs to mask the pain and then forced to run at full speed.

Repetitive stress injuries, if not allowed to “remodel,” or heal, properly, can lead to catastrophic injuries that require the animal to be euthanized. “[I]f horses are overtrained during remodeling . . . then an overt clinical fracture can result” (Oke). For example, the rest period for a horse with a hairline fracture might be cut short if the owner is reluctant to pass up the opportunity to enter a lucrative race. Miscalculation on the part of the trainer could end in tragedy if the hairline fracture is unable to withstand the impact and the horse’s leg shatters during the race. Sadly, such practices are not uncommon.

Bill Surface, who spent much of his early newspaper career covering two major racetracks in Kentucky, wrote a book about what he witnessed at Belmont Park in New York. Although Surface made no promise not to divulge unethical or illegal behavior, he was allowed complete access to all parts of the track and stables and was taken into the confidence of several of the people he encountered.

In talking to various people, Surface learned that owners and trainers often try to hide the fact that the horse that they are racing is lame, especially in claiming races. A claiming race is one in which all horses are for sale at roughly the same price, and all are supposed to be of comparable ability. In addition to people placing bets on the winners, anyone licensed to own race horses can lay claim to a particular horse just prior to the start of the race and take ownership immediately after the race ends (Wikipedia). A trainer named Phil Johnson openly told Surface about the time he claimed a horse that turned out to have broken bones in two feet:

“I claimed this horse off John Lipari that wins by eight lengths in the slop and still looks perfect. We go to pick up the horse at the saliva barn [where officials test saliva for illegal drugs] an hour after the race and he’s got broken coffin bones in two feet. It’s three days before he can walk enough to just move him out of the barn. Yeah, one of the smartest deals I ever made afterward was with that horse.”

“You got him racing again?” asks the owner.
“It was playing like you’re helping a blind man through the tunnel,” Johnson says. “I sold that horse to somebody for fifteen hundred.” (Surface 123)

Abuses like the example above plague the horse racing industry. Dr. Robert Miller, DVM, is an advocate for reform in equine sports. He wonders why it seems that veterinarians are among those who are most likely to oppose such inhumane practices. “Is it because we best understand the trauma being inflicted upon immature skeletons, joints, ligaments, and tendons?” (Miller). Dr. Miller is not an animal rights activist, and he is not opposed to racing, as long as the animals are not abused. However, he says: “[s]uch abuses exist in every breed, every discipline, in every equine sport” (Miller).

The reform effort is hampered by the fact that national statistics on the number of horse racing injuries and deaths are impossible to accurately determine because each state has its own racing commission, and there is no consistency in the collection of data from state to state. Some states report only those injuries that occur during actual races, but not during on-track training sessions. Reporting of race-related horse deaths varies, as well. Some states only record the number of horses euthanized on the track, but not those that died later due to complications from on-track racing breakdowns.

From November 2008 to October 2009, the Jockey Club, an organization dedicated to the improvement of Thoroughbred breeding and racing, reported an overall rate of 2.04 fatal injuries per 1,000 starts (Angst). That figure may not seem significant, but consider that U.S. Thoroughbred racetracks reported a total of 5,000 horse deaths from 2003 to 2007. And while more than three horse deaths a day were reported in 2007, lax recordkeeping makes it impossible to know how many others occurred (Associated Press).

Consistency in data collection would provide more accurate numbers when looking at national rates of injury and death. Dr. Mary Scollay, DVM, helped develop the Jockey Club Equine Injury Database, which counts all horses “that died following an on-track racing breakdown, no matter how long after the incident” (Angst). She is urging all state racing commissions to utilize this one database so that a true measure can be taken of all racetrack injuries and deaths throughout the U.S.
Widespread drug abuse is also a problem. Steroids, painkillers, and anti-inflammatory drugs are used to enhance the animals’ performances and temporarily lessen the impact of injuries. Owners and trainers who get caught doping their horses are subjected to fines, disqualifications, and suspensions; nevertheless, repeat offenders are still in the business.

As with reporting injury and death, there is no national standard for banning illegal drugs. “[S]tates have varying resources and philosophies on drug testing and enforcement” (Barker). Steroids are banned in many states but still allowed in others. To add to the difficulty, drug testing at some race tracks is performed before the race, while at others, the horses are not tested until after the race. If an owner finds the rules too stringent in one state, there is nothing prohibiting that owner from traveling to a state where the rules are more lax.

There are those who believe the industry can adequately police itself. Alex Waldrop, president of a Kentucky-based Thoroughbred racing group, contends that a central governing body would not make any difference, and that the industry has made great progress in the last few years. It is true that there have been many improvements since the first summit on the welfare and safety of racehorses in 2006. Groups such as the Jockey Club and the Racing and Medication Testing Consortium are working together to improve research, data compilation, and education to ensure the health and welfare of racehorses. In the past few years, many racetracks have installed synthetic surfaces in an attempt to reduce the number of injuries and fatalities. However, there is much debate about the pros and cons of synthetic tracks. Many in the industry believe they will simply result in different injuries, not fewer.

Comprehensive reform is needed in the horse racing industry to ensure that the abuses currently taking place are stopped. The first step should be to empower a commissioner or other central governing body to enforce standardized rules to protect the animals. Federal lawmakers are following up on data received from industry groups to determine whether measures they have taken so far are adequate or if legislation will be necessary.

A campaign to educate the race-going public is urgently needed. If more people were aware of the inhumane treatment of the horses, they could choose to boycott any racetracks that did not
adhere to the strictest protective guidelines. Economic pressure, more than any other incentive, would bring about positive change.

The general public, too, needs to be educated about the magnitude of the problem. News media only cover high-profile incidents, such as the tragic deaths of Barbaro in 2007 and Eight Bells in 2008. Both horses received a great deal of coverage because they were at the apexes of their careers and because they both suffered catastrophic injuries during high-stakes races. Closer media scrutiny of all races, not just the best known, would do much to bring the horseracing industry’s shortcomings to the forefront, resulting in more public pressure on the industry to clean up its act.
WORKS CITED


Weinbach, Jon. “Zenyatta Rocks 'n' Rolls to Date With History at Breeders' Cup.” Web. 02 Nov. 2010.