

HORSE RACING: BREEDING BY THE NUMBERS

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INDEX

Part 1: The Statistics (p. 1)
Part 2: In the Shed – Stallions and Broodmares (p. 3)
Part 3: In the Ring (p. 6)

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PART 1: THE STATISTICS

GLOBALLY in excess of 100,000 Thoroughbreds are produced each year, few of which in actual fact make it to the finish line.

Current statistics from The Jockey Club (2009) identify the USA as the most prolific country in terms of foal crops holding almost 30% of the world's foal population on a continuing annual basis; Australia, Ireland and Argentina follow with 15%, 9.5% and 7.8% respectively.

In fact, the top 10 breeding countries in the world comprise 87% of the total number of Thoroughbreds foaled each year. [1]

Over the last 6 decades (i.e. 1950-2009), in North America alone, the foal crop has quadrupled to massive proportions, particularly during the 1980's which saw the number almost double from the previous decade. [2]

The situation in NA is typical of the global picture where the quest for profit by the horse racing industry's influential investors has led to over-production of physically weak Thoroughbreds built for speed rather than endurance. Currently only about 35% are sufficiently robust and healthy to start racing. Breeding Thoroughbreds became a greed riddled business in the late 80's and continued through the 90's.

More recently, the breeding of Thoroughbreds has abated as a result of the sagging economy and its negative impact on sales.

According to The Jockey Club statistics, in North America there were 27,233 Thoroughbreds produced in 2010, down 15 % from 2008 with a further estimated decline of 10% in 2011. [3]

On a global basis the same trend has been observed for several of the major contributors to the foal crop, but not all. For example, Australian and Irish coverings are down by 11.5% and 20% respectively over the period from 2008 to 2010 while slight increases (i.e. 2% - 3%) have been estimated for France, Japan and New Zealand. [4]

Nonetheless, over-breeding remains problematic for the "unwanted horse" epidemic from both a North American and global perspective.

Depending on the country, in any given year on average only 60% to 65% of the Thoroughbreds foaled are destined for a career on the track of which even fewer make actually make it to their first race.

Even more sobering is that only 5% of these Thoroughbreds will go on to win a larger-pursed stakes race and a mere 0.2% will win a Grade I stakes race. [5]

The remaining "unremarkable" racehorses who equally push the limits of their endurance are consigned to lower grade races on cheap tracks without fame or glory.

These facts and figures make a profound statement of the global breeding industry.

Most importantly, what happens to the 35% to 40%, or more, of those who never see the track?

Secondly, given that most of these horses only race until the age of 6, the question as to their fate for the remaining 20+ years of their lives emerges.

The majority of those who don't make the grade are sold to slaughter, including foals.

Serena Miller witnessed what happens at Turners near Nantwich, Cheshire, one of two horse slaughter plants in Great Britain, where they carry out 'equine services' on Fridays.

Miller provided the following account to the Daily Mail (UK):

"I went in pretending to be a racehorse owner and was given a tour of the slaughterhouse by Valerie Turner, the owner's wife," she says.

"There were some very young thoroughbreds waiting to be killed. They were just babies. Shots were going off all the time, and they were petrified.

"They were shaking, weeing themselves, eating each others' necks. Their eyes were wild, they were wet with sweat and there was a stink of blood. I asked how long they had been there for, and I was told a week.

"A week waiting in terror to be shot. It was a sorry sight.

"I was told that their trainer had dropped them off on the way to the races."
[6]

The prognosis for horses who make it to the racetrack is equally dismal. On average, two out of every three Thoroughbreds who come off the track – even those who are sound and healthy – are euthanized, abandoned or shipped to slaughter.

[1] Jockey Club Online Fact Book; Thoroughbred Racing and Breeding Worldwide; <http://tiny.cc/cn5at> .

[2] Jockey Club Online Fact Book; Annual North American Registered Foal Crop by Decade 1880-1999; <http://tiny.cc/e2scc> .

[3] Jockey Club Online Fact Book; Annual North American Registered Foal Crop by Year 2001-Apr 5, 2011; <http://tiny.cc/f54im> .

[4] International Federation of Horse Racing; <http://www.ifhaonline.org/> .

[5] Mullane, Laura Anne; "Beasts of Burden: What happens to Thoroughbred racehorses after retirement"; Washington Post; May 30, 2010; <http://tiny.cc/lukwc> .

[6] Brennan, Zoe; "Why healthy foals – some just a day old – are being killed across Britain by a crisis-hit racing industry"; Daily Mail (UK); Apr. 9, 2009; <http://tiny.cc/5thkg> .

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PART 2: IN THE SHED

ONLY a small percentage of stallions (2%) who are valued for their performance on the track and "refined" gene pools are judged eligible for breeding.

In contrast about 52% of the mares go on to become broodmares. [1]

Modern Thoroughbred breeding can be likened to a production line that spews out an ever increasing number of inherently weakened horses as a result of the incessant inbreeding that has occurred over time.

STALLIONS

Most stallions who go to stud these days are young and have only raced a scant number of races during their career.

Racing at the tender age of two when their bone structures have barely begun to mature they are prepped for races such as the prestigious 3YO Triple Crown where they are forced to extremes and where profits exceed the value of their structural maturity.

This merciless ritual places undue stress on immature statures which typically require 5 years of development to reach the adult stage. The underlying principle is simply a business proposition – retire an expensive yearling early, before they have the prospect of breakdown on the track as a consequence of inbreeding, drugs and the like.

In truth, breeding stallions are fundamentally robots - oppressed slaves of an industry whose only objective is unremitting manufacture of semen.

Decades ago the typical number of mares a stallion might cover per annum was in the range of 40 to 50; during the explosion in breeding numbers in the 80' and 90's this number escalated to 150 to 160 and in today's realm of the breeding shed covering as many as 200 mares is not uncommon.

For instance, the 2 leading breeding stallions in NA - Giant's Causeway and Medaglia d'Oro - each covered 194 mares during the 2009 breeding season while Encosta de Laco, a grandson of Northern Dancer, covered a record 240 mares in 2005. [2, 3]

During the peak of the breeding season, stallions may be required to cover three mares a day – a “sperm bank” in the truest sense of the word.

Apart from their forced and controlled encounters with the mares, stallions lead a life of isolation for up to as many as 20 years. For fear of injury they are not ridden and kept stabled or face solitary confinement in fenced areas away from other horses. The tedium of life for these poor creatures must be excruciating.

For stallions highly valued for their bloodlines, life can be chaotic.

It is common practice to ship stallions acknowledged for their genetic pedigree

within and between the southern and northern hemispheres of the world to cover both breeding seasons and maximize short-term profits.

When travel distances are far reaching these horses are known as "shuttle stallions". Stressful and disruptive for these horses, the practice also contributes to concentrated inbreeding and potential transfer of equine disease which can decimate a population of otherwise healthy equines. [4]

The sad recourse of this insidious breeding industry results in many stallions succumbing to premature death as a result of deprived life experience. Others end up at the slaughterhouse if their careers at stud are unsuccessful, regardless of their accolades on the track.

Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner who went on to capture the following year's Horse of the Year title with a dramatic victory over 1987 Derby hero Alysheba in the Breeders' Cup Classic died sometime in 2002 in a slaughterhouse in Japan. Exceller, the only horse to ever defeat two Triple Crown winners (Affirmed and Seattle Slew), met his tragic fate in a Swedish slaughterhouse.

As much as the breeding stallions suffer, they are not alone in their misery.

Teasers

Teaser stallions are uncastrated adult male horses used to gauge the receptiveness of the mares. The teaser and mare are introduced, typically separated by a fence; if the mare reciprocates, it is taken as a signal that it is "safe" to introduce her to the breeding stallion.

Teaser stallions are rarely, ever permitted to breed, subjecting them to a constant state of flux and despair and just like the stallions they are kept in an isolated environment without social contact to avert any misguided pregnancies or altercations with the breeding stallions.

BROODMARES

Broodmares suffer an equally unsettling fate. Highly valued mares who have prestigious pedigrees, have a proven track record and/or have produced champion foals in the past are repeatedly bred with top breeding stallions to maximize profits.

What's more, a mare doesn't necessarily have to be raced.[5] Sometimes the only requirement is desired bloodlines wherein she may unwittingly pass on unidentified weaknesses and unsoundness.

Perpetual Pregnancy

Given that the gestation period is 11 months and after giving birth they are in heat 7-10 days later these spent broodmares are immediately re-bred to ensure they produce another potential champion foal in 11 months.

This chronic cycle pushes the mares to extreme biological limits and leaves them in a state of perpetual pregnancy.

To ensure maximum return on the mares, their ovulation cycles are systematically controlled by artificial light during the long winter months and prostaglandins are administered to activate their dormant systems.

More powerful hormonal drugs are then used to stimulate ovulation at precisely the right time to ensure optimum conditions when the covering takes place.

All of this is unnatural – upsetting the natural circadian rhythm during the winter months and exposing these mares to unnecessary and elevated levels of estrogen and other steroidal compounds.

In the racing industry the official "birthday" of Thoroughbreds is January 1st in the Northern Hemisphere and August 1st in the Southern Hemisphere.

The tactics of artificial lights and premature stimulation of a mare's reproductive system is a contrived strategy to producing foals as close to the "birthday" as possible since these artificial dates have been established to facilitate the standardization of races for horses in specific age groups.

The method of impregnation for the mares is sterile, methodical and unequivocally controlled by human intervention. Many mares, especially those who are bred for the first time, can be terrified of the stallion.

Ultimately the process is nothing more than pre-arranged rape. With legs straddled, tied down and conceivably drugged, depending on the struggle, the stallion mounts her.

Mares in their twenties and closing in on their lifespan continue to be subjected to this ruthless cycle.

Many older mares will suffer and die from health-related complications associated with countless pregnancies over many years.

Others will simply be put out to auction, some carrying foals, where they will end up at the slaughterhouse along with other Thoroughbreds who have since lost

their "value" to their owners. This "value" is strictly measured in dollars in the industry.

[1] Animal Aid UK; "Bred to Death"; Undated; <http://tiny.cc/mp2pc> .

[2] Liebman, Dan; "Mares Bred Down 13.5%"; Blood Horse Magazine Online Special Reports; 2009; <http://tiny.cc/3o2xz> .

[3] Animal Aid UK; "Bred to Death"; Undated; <http://tiny.cc/5xkuf> .

[4] Young, Craig; "Call for a ban on shuttle Stallions"; The Sydney Morning Herald; Sept. 2, 2007; <http://tiny.cc/zdn2w> .

[5] Animal Aid UK; "Bred to Death"; Undated; <http://tiny.cc/mp2pc> .

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PART 3: IN THE RING

ONCE a mare has foaled nothing remotely normal ensues.

Breeding stallions typically remain on the studs and the mares, now-fertile only 7 to 10 days after giving birth, are transported to these farms for re-impregnation.

What becomes of their foals?

Nurse Mares

The journey to the auction ring begins with the nurse mares.

Due to the urgency of re-breeding the broodmares after foaling, the Thoroughbred foals are abruptly weaned and cared for by surrogate mothers known as nurse mares.

The tradition of breeding ordinary mares to ordinary studs to induce lactation has been practiced for many years. Originally these mares served to nurture rejected foals or those whose mothers died in childbirth.

Today this is a thriving industry as a result of the explosion in breeding numbers and the frenzied quest to mass produce foals in hopes of producing a single racing champion.

Just like the broodmares, the nurse mares are subject to the same recurrent cycling of pregnancy losing their foals prematurely and are leased out to profitable breeding farms as surrogates for the privileged Thoroughbred foals.

The fate of the nurse mare foals compared to their Thoroughbred complements however, are categorically opposed.

While the Thoroughbred foal is coddled and valued as a potential race horse, the nurse mare foals are merely the by-products of the industry. A fortunate few may be rescued by horse advocacy groups but the greater part are killed by clubbing or other means, some are starved to death and others are sold to the tanning industry for their hides also known as "pony skins". Since it is illegal to send foals under six months to slaughter, they skin them to manufacture high-end "Cordovan" leather products. [1]

Foals reach their maximum commercial value as yearlings.

As commercial breeding of Thoroughbreds escalated during the 80's and 90's so did the prices for yearlings.

What was once considered normal no longer was in vogue and a new breed of "enhanced" yearling was born. Gone were the natural ways to prepare the weanlings for the ring and what emerged in its place is still controversial today.

The demand surged for large, muscular, sleek yearlings with straight legs; by definition "correct". These sought after attributes are achieved through aberrant measures that put enormous stress on these young horses. They are fed high-protein, high-carbohydrate diets and administered steroidal drugs to build muscle mass and bulk. Confinement is typical as is forced exercise using treadmills. [2]

Even more disturbing are the surgical procedures coupled with corrective measures used to straighten their awkward legs.

"Toeing out is corrected by stripping - pulling back the edges of the periosteum, the tissue that protects the bone, to stimulate the side of the growth plate that has fallen below and caused the asymmetry."

"Knock knees are corrected by insertion of screws, wires or staples that retard growth on the side of the plate that has raced ahead." [3]

Many breeders are apprehensive to use these methods but feel forced to due to stiff competition from others whose only goal is "big money". None of these methods are natural nor are they long-lasting as a result of rapid and superficial growth that takes place during the first year of the weanling's life.

For the most part it is uncertain what these procedures will generate later in life and some claim that these surgeries may in fact contribute to unsoundness. Moreover there is no apparent correlation between straight legs and performance.
[4]

Once these yearlings are ready for their debut in the auction ring, the ruse continues. Analogous to a beauty pageant, these young horses literally gleam.

Having been taught to walk correctly and pose for the audience they make their awe-inspiring entrance. Polished coats, glinting noses coated in Vaseline, along with their lustrous eyes and ears coated with baby oil and feet painted with black equine nail polish they are magnificent creatures to behold.

But are they real and will they perform?

The cursory nature of their preparation makes it difficult for even the most seasoned buyer to differentiate between a potential winner and an average run-of-the-mill horse. Even so, the cruelty and abuse these literal "babies" are subjected to is in itself reprehensible – all for the sake of money.

Commercialization has effectively demonized the racing industry.

[1] Allin, Jane; "Milk of Death: The dark side of the Nurse Mare industry"; Tuesday's Horse; Aug. 19, 2010; <http://wp.me/p6VVi-37k> .

[2] Cassidy, Rebecca; "Horse People, Thoroughbred Culture in Lexington and Newmarket", The John Hopkins University Press; 2007.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

END

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