

HORSE RACING

WHERE WILL ALL THE HORSES GO?

by JOHN HETTINGER

Reprinted from THE BLOOD-HORSE, pp. 3492-3492, JUNE 28, 2003

WHEN we started Blue Horse Charities a little over a year ago our aim was to save as many Thoroughbreds as possible from a bad end by creating awareness to the problem of slaughter (many owners simply had no idea when their horse was at risk) and by facilitating adoption. Then groups in several states started seeking to legislate an end to horse slaughter. Now, Congressman John L. Sweeney, chairman of the Congressional Horse Caucus, has introduced the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (HR 857). It will be presented in the Senate by Sen. John Kerry very shortly. The main concern should be to keep Thoroughbreds from being mistreated.

We favor Congressman Sweeney's bill [HR 857] and believe that the great majority of Thoroughbred owners feel a responsibility toward their horses and would never let them go to slaughter.

However, one way or another thousands of Thoroughbreds meet this end; many through a lack of awareness on the part of their owners, some through misrepresentations of those who buy them, and some through theft. There are those who are apologists for slaughter and wedded to the status quo. One of their most commonly heard arguments is "where would all the horses go? Our concern is to keep them from being mistreated."

We believe these arguments to be mistaken, sometimes cynical, and occasionally surreal. We'd like to have a look at the arguments of the pro-slaughter forces from several points of view: I. STATISTICAL, II. LOGICAL, III. CULTURAL, and IV. from the point of view of the IMAGE of our industry. We will do this without pointing a finger at any group in our industry.

- I. STATISTICAL. The pro-slaughter forces seek to minimize the problem by stating that less than 1% of horses wind up being "processed" (their word). However, by making this (true) assertion, they show that their concern about "where would all the

horses go?" is essentially bogus. The percentage of increase in the overall horse population would be extremely small.

There were approximately 350,000 horses slaughtered in the United States in 1990. This was down to about 40,000 in 2002. Did this drastic reduction in the number of horses slaughtered result in dramatic increases in neglect and cruelty to horses? Certainly not; no one ever claimed that. As a matter of fact, between 1992 and 1993 the reduction in the number slaughtered was 79,000 (responding to market forces), twice the number which would be saved if slaughter ended completely tomorrow!

The idea that a system that ceased to slaughter 79,000 horses in one year would face disastrous conditions if somewhat under 40,000 ceased to be slaughtered now is ludicrous. Another question asked is "what would be done with all these dead horses?" It is estimated that the horse population of the United States is about 6,900,000 and that somewhat less than .07% of these horses wind up in slaughterhouses annually.

A simple answer to the question of what is to be done with them when they die is that this is a totally insignificant increase, and that they should be disposed of in the same way as the ones not presently sent to slaughter, the overwhelming majority of the horse population.

- II. LOGICAL. The claim of the pro-slaughter forces is that their concerns are humanitarian and unrelated to financial concerns. There are those who would disagree with them; for example, Pernell Hopkins, a police officer specializing in equine investigation, who for two years has monitored Pennsylvania horse sales that sell to slaughter. Officer Hopkins states in a letter published in the June 2002 edition of *The Horse* that slaughter encourages neglect, and that "Money is the only objective of selling horses to slaughter. Those of us in the trenches have seen enough." (Emphasis supplied.)

The logical proposition goes this way. We have a potential perpetrator (one who might abuse a horse) and a potential victim (the horse). The answer offered by the pro-slaughter forces is to kill the potential victim so that the potential perpetrator can't perpetrate! Comments here are unnecessary. Thoroughbreds should be retired, adopted out, or euthanized... we must end the slaughter of horses.

The pro-slaughter argument that some people can't afford euthanasia really doesn't deserve much attention either. Anyone who believes that it is all right to use a horse until he is unable to be used any longer, and then plead that a humane end that costs

less than one month's board is an argument for the perpetuation of this truly horrific cruelty, will agree with them.

There are laws on the books in every state whose aim is to protect animals from abuse. If potential abuse is the problem, we who care about horses should redouble our efforts to see that these laws are enforced.

- III. CULTURAL. How do we as an industry feel about our horses? Are we horse lovers? Are these animals, who work for us in one way or another throughout their entire lives, sensitive and capable of trust, courage, and generosity of spirit? Or are they fast cows without horns?

It is very common to see Thoroughbreds turned into personalities for promotional purposes, to increase the gate on a given day, for example. "Persimmon likes to have his picture taken"... "Calamity Jane knows when she's won," etc. We've all seen plenty of this kind of thing. We endow them with semi-human characteristics in print and on television when it suits our purposes... then we look the other way when bad things happen.

Could this be called hypocritical? Do these animals have these endearing characteristics or don't they? Eating horses is common sense in some cultures but has no place in ours. Almost all horse meat is sent abroad and both slaughter houses now operating in the U.S. are foreign owned. Is it right that we allow our horses to end this way (which involves several days of pain and terror) to supply meat to foreign countries?

There are well known fairs which conduct race meets and allow rescue organizations access to their grounds to try and save some of them on the condition that they don't talk about it. If they felt that what is going on was right would this be a condition of access to their grounds?

- IV. IMAGE. There are a lot of people in our industry working hard to put our sport on everyone's "radar screen." They must realize that if they are successful, all aspects of our sport will be better known and understood.

The reaction of the American people, should they learn what is going on, is tacitly understood by these people and evidenced by their efforts to sweep it under the rug. The use of words "plants" (for slaughterhouses) and "processing" (for slaughter)

attests to this. They should realize that the publicity this activity has garnered over the last couple of years is nothing compared to what is coming as the issue becomes understood by increasing numbers of people, and public relations professionals become involved.

Conversely there is a tremendous public relations opportunity here for the Thoroughbred industry should it decide to take a leadership role in abolishing slaughter through legislation. This might have been considered a peripheral issue a couple of years ago, but this is no longer the case.

All the Thoroughbred auction houses in North America have weighed in. The board of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, comprised of every national Thoroughbred organization, voted unanimously to support a ban on the slaughter of Thoroughbreds. And industry leaders such as Ted Bassett, Reiley McDonald, Gary Biszantz, Nadia Sanan, and Nick Zito have all come out definitively opposing horse slaughter, correctly labeling it "unconscionable," "gruesome," and "barbaric." More recently the New Jersey Racing Commission, the New York Breeding and Development Fund, and, by unanimous vote of its trustees, the New York Racing Association, have specifically endorsed the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act. We feel that the time has come for all of us in our industry who call ourselves horse lovers to take a leadership role and end this institutionalized cruelty.

Where would all the horses go? They would be retired, adopted out, or euthanized. We have no desire to point a finger at anybody or hurt anybody, but the lowest common denominator cannot be allowed to prevail any longer. We must end the slaughter of horses. The ever-expanding network of rescue agencies operated by horse lovers from coast to coast will put their shoulders to the wheel to make this work.

#

John Hettinger is a member of The Jockey Club, a trustee for the New York Racing Association, and a director of Fasig-Tipton Co. He formed Blue Horse Charities, which raises money for adoption and retirement programs through Fasig-Tipton sales. Owner of Akindale Farm in New York state, Hettinger was honored with a Special Eclipse Award in 2000.