



# EFTBA Veterinary Newsletter 16



Fig. 1 The fictitious Sheet Anchor at the end of his life as a racehorse (Mills 1865)

## The retired racehorse part I

### Welcome to EFTBA's veterinary newsletter

Dear European breeders,

Once again the chosen subject by Hanspeter is an important matter in the eyes of horse lovers and those who may not be so close to the horse but care for animals in a more general fashion.

Hanspeter with this first part gives an excellent introduction and a historical retrospect which I feel will continue with future parts and will

be of great interest to all members of EFTBA. Thank you Hanspeter

With kind regards

Loïc Malivet

*Loïc Malivet*

Chairman, EFTBA

### Editorial

The uncertain fate of many racehorses that awaits them when their careers are over, is at present considered to be the most hotly debated issue in the Thoroughbred racing industry (Staff and Correspondents of Blood-Horse Publications, 2009). Beside this statement of people within the industry, reproaches in regard to the handling of this matter of fact have been published in great numbers all over the world lately.

Of course, it is a fact that racehorses spend only a relative short time in the sport, and that not all of

them find the way into the breeding shed afterwards. They may therefore become "unwanted horses" and this subject has been an item on the agenda of many recent meetings of TB-breeding organizations as well.

This newsletter wants to review the state of affairs and possible means for realistic approaches to this task.

*Dr Hanspeter Meier*

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. Racehorses retire early and with a potential life span of many years, longer than in racing

. Only the most promising percentage of them finds the way into the breeding shed

. Retired racehorses need to go somewhere and after-care has to be an integral part of racing and breeding

***"Many thanks to Mrs. Eva-Maria Bucher-Haefner, Moyglare Stud Farm, for her valued sponsorship of this newsletter."***



Profound Beauty (Danehill) owned and bred by Moyglare Stud.

## Introduction

The importance of the subject of retired racehorses is highlighted by many articles, books and also excellent informations in the internet (e.g. Clark, Coldrey, Heros, RoR).

However, the theme “unwanted horses” also has been in the media in relation to many other problems as for instance neglected animals due to economic crises and the ban of slaughtering horses in the USA. Unfortunately, in the past too many journalists and organizations didn't differentiate the problems and facts well enough and the racing and breeding industry therefore was criticized un- factually and tendentiously in some instances.

In this review, therefore we want to concentrate only on recent happenings and developments in endeavors towards the welfare of retired race- horses.

## Definitions

In the USA, unwanted horses have been defined as those that may be sick, injured or old, or be those that owners are no longer able to afford, fail to meet their owners' expectations or simply be those that their owners no longer know what to do with (Unwanted Horse Coalition, 2010).

This definition applies to horses of any breed and utilization, of course, but the apportionment into the mentioned categories may differ. In the case of the Thoroughbred, we have the situation that a race- horse at the time of his retirement still may be young, sound and useful for many tasks. It may only be “unwanted” in regard to the high-performance sport and the breeding industry, for which he has been bred originally. Therefore, it is nevertheless listed under “unwanted horses” but actually can just be an “ex-racehorse” or an “off-track Thorough- bred” (OTTB) - maybe even a “racetrack cast-off”.

This matter of fact is an inherent part of racing (es- pecially for geldings) and it is also a simple worldly wisdom of life that zeniths always are the beginning of the end of careers. In this respect and according to the President and CEO of Keeneland Association Nicholson (2009), one therefore must realize that at the core of all the joy and pleasure of racing, ownership also means a deep responsibility. Along with the thrill of owning a horse comes the com- mitment to its care, health and well-being. Simply put – you can't have one without the other.

## Historical Notes

The fate of the retired horse (*equus munere de- functus*) is a subject which has been a concomi- tant phenomenon of horseracing for ever. Already in the Love Books of Ovid (liber secundus IXa), we notice the sentence: “*The courser, freed from his stall, leapeth in the meadow*” (*mittitur in saltus car- cere liber equus*). Obviously, the Roman horses had a happy retirement, comparable to the pensioning of the soldiers then (“*The war-worn veteran lays down his arms and tills his allotted fields.*”).

In regard to the Thoroughbred of today, we know very well that already one of the founding fathers - *Godolphin Arabian* - was told to have been found between the shafts of a water-cart in Paris in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the opinion of Willett (1970) and Longrigg (1972), this story has to be con- sidered as far-fetched and difficult to substantiate – but nevertheless, it is most interesting to notice that at least the uncertain destiny of Thoroughbreds al- ready was in the mind of the society almost 300 years ago (Fig. 2).

And exactly 150 years ago, the empathy for the forgotten and worn-out racehorse was also a sub- ject in the fictitious story “The life of a racehorse” of Mills (1865), where the horse *Sheet Anchor* (remark- ably said to be out of a dam-line by *Godolphin Arabian*) ended as the property of an adventurous cabman – alone, dwelling on the past, without a friend and a hope (Fig. 1).



Fig. 2 A host of legends surrounded the career of *Godolphin Arabian* (1724). Among the more far- fetched was that he was discovered in Paris drawing a water cart. This story is attractive but difficult to substantiate (Willett 1970, Longrigg 1972).

## Nowadays

At meetings of the International Federation of Thoroughbred Breeders' (ITBF), it was made clear that nobody wants to breed an unwanted horse – but nevertheless risks that any produce might encounter this fate, especially in uncertain times. This fear therefore occupies the mind of us breeders also, but we know at the same time, that the care of a sold horse is the responsibility of its owner. However, "overbreeding" (breeding too many foals) is also blamed as a cause for the number of unwanted horses (Biles 2008).

A few examples of commentaries and publications of public perception may illustrate today's situation.

## USA

### Aftercare no longer an afterthought

In the Daily Racing Form, Hovdey (2012) reckoned that the process, by which Thoroughbreds are bred, for private use or for market, and then trained to compete in a setting of parimutuel wagering for personal or corporate profit, is woefully inefficient and ultimately wasteful. This despite the fact that in practice it can be aesthetically pleasing and downright romantic.

He went on that in 2010 there were 68'235 individual Thoroughbreds who ran in at least one official race in the United States or Canada. It can be presumed those 68'235 horses ranged in ages from 2 on up, that most of them were either 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6, and therefore drawn from the foal crops of 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005 and 2004. According to The Jockey Club, the total number of foals registered in North America for those five years was 186'913. That's 186'913 Thoroughbred foals brought into this part of the Northern Hemisphere – in hopes they would grown up to join in the parade as viable racehorses and maybe even last a while. But by the time 2010 came around only 68'235 of them were available to answer the bell.

Hovdey therefore asks: "So what happened to the rest, upwards of a hundred thousand?" And he concludes: "The vast majority were not major stakes winners, destined for stud duty or pampered retirements. And it is that vast majority – the majority of each and every foal crop – that defines the Thoroughbred industry as wasteful and inefficient." In his opinion, an industry is characterized not only by its impact on the economic well-being, but also by the disposal of its waste. The waste created by Thoroughbred racing and breeding – euphemized

as "unwanted horses" – has finally become an issue of national significance. Stories abound of horse owners in economic distress and given precious few choices to lighten their load, and so horses are abandoned, sold with a blind eye turned, or given away with impunity. Add to that the fact that horses, even racehorses, can be legally sold and transported across some state lines and out of the country for slaughter, is it any wonder racing is becoming increasingly damned by sensitized citizenry?

Further on, Hovdey thinks that the leaders of Thoroughbred racing finally may be getting the message. What has been shouted from the rooftops for the last two decades by impassioned individuals and private rescue and retirement organizations is now manifested in what is being called the 'Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance', a coming together of nearly every major racing group in an effort to address the need to provide for horses after their racing and breeding days are past.

## Australia

### What happens to racehorses when they leave the track?

*In 2013 the Australian Racing Board (ARB) commissioned Thoroughbred consultant Renée Geelen to undertake a survey of retired horses. Her report revealed that the Australian racing industry is the second largest in the world (after the USA) with more than \$ 520 million in prizemoney on offer every year (Geelen 2104). Over 70'000 people own shares in more than 32'000 racehorses and the range of ownership is huge. Some syndicates have more than 100 people involved in one horse, while bigger owners have more than 500 horses in work.*

Racehorses mature quickly compared to other breeds, and can legally start racing from the age of two. Only 20% of horses actually race as 2 year olds, but these precocious horses have longer careers and earn more prizemoney than horses that take longer to mature. They retire, and with a potential life span of 25 years, these horses need to go somewhere.

So what happens to all those racehorses? Every season, approximately 11'000 racehorses retire for a range of reasons, such as old age, injury, illness, or being not fast enough to compete successfully.

Owning a pleasure horse is not like owning a car, there is no central registration for them and therefore there is no data on what happens to all those racehorses. Australian Stud Book records tell us that

approximately 3'000 of the 11'000 retirees go to stud, staying in the racing industry, but this leaves 8'000 horses that we needed to collect timely data about.

An initial list of 25 trainers was compiled that represented the major city and country based stables across Australia. These trainers had an average of 100 horses that had raced for them over the past three seasons, and by tracking these horses one ended up with information about 2'514 horses. Because of the initial bias towards large stables, the survey was later expanded to include 21 other country trainers to capture a wider range of horses across the industry. The response rate was much lower, with only 12 trainers responding with data for 737 horses, resulting in a total of 3'224 horses surveyed (Geelen 2014).

The results were:

<b>Still Racing</b>	<b>Combined Results</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of Retired</b>
Different Trainer	662	21%	-
Still in Work/Spelling	1'015	31%	-
Exported	77	2%	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>1'754</b>	<b>54%</b>	-
<b>Completed Racing Career</b>			
At Stud	664	21%	45%
Sold / Gifted as pleasure horse	450	14%	31%
Returned to Owner	205	6%	14%
Died/Euthanised	109	3%	7%
Unknown	19	0.6%	1.3%
Career in Racing	17	0.5%	1.2%
Knackery	6	0.2%	0.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1'470</b>		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3'224</b>		

The notes on the different jobs that horses went on to do under the 'Sold / Given away as a pleasure horse' category were quite wide ranging and interesting. The comments include:

"stars in horse movies",  
 "stock horse in Broome",  
 "eventer",  
 "champion show jumper in Victoria",  
 "polo",  
 "sports brood-mare",  
 "nanny horse at stud",  
 "ridden by an 11 year old girl who loves him",  
 "plays Phar Lap in the Outback Australia show",  
 "owner's kids ride her",  
 "riding for the disabled",  
 "he's on a farm we bought for all our retired horses", and so on.

Stock horses, pony club, and show horses were the most common comments for where retired horses had ended up. Many country trained horses had owners who were graziers and used their retired horses on their farms.

This survey found that most retired racehorses find a new career after racing, and gratifyingly, from a scientific point of view, this data line up with a previous survey done in 2002/03 (Geelen 2014).

## Europe

For Europe, Ireland may serve as an example, as it suffered worst in regard to unsubstantiated claims of the extent of the problem (e.g. New York Times report of "tens of thousands of horses reported abandoned").

Here, the industry bodies (Irish Thoroughbred Breeders' Association ITBA and Horse Sport Ireland HIS) commissioned two investigations. The first study had the title "Aspects of the owning/keeping and disposal of horses, and how these relate to equine health/welfare in Ireland" (Collins et al. 2011), and the second "A demographic survey of unwanted horses in Ireland 2005-2010" (Leadon et al. 2012).

Ireland has long been renowned as a major centre for the breeding, rearing and keeping of horses. Since 2007, however, there generally has been an increasing concern for horse health and welfare standards, and links between these concerns and the structures, governance and funding of the Irish equine industries had been reported (Collins et al. 2011). As in the USA, unwanted horses had clearly become a social and economic problem, but the understanding of the extent and magnitude of the problem was fragmentary and emotive. Industry

bodies therefore had called for clarification on the extent of the problem (Leadon et al. 2012).

Both studies embraced very comprehensive investigations and Collins et al. (2011) concluded that there is a pressing need for a more centrally mandated and uniformly applied system of governance to safeguard the health and promote the keeping of horses to a higher welfare standard in Ireland. Fundamental to an understanding of why there is insufficient oversight of the keeping and proper disposal of horses is the lack of a comprehensive, integrated system for the registration, identification and tracing of equidae in Ireland.

The background of the investigation of Leadon et al. (2012) were the expansion of the Irish horse industry during the Celtic Tiger boom years and its contraction in the following economic recession. These findings revealed that high value horses were traditionally controlled through sale at public auction, private sales and sales to dealers; these were now being reduced by decreases in production (>40%), and increases in retirement, rehoming, euthanasia and disposal through Category 2 plants and abattoirs. However, Thoroughbreds were always a minority of the general horse population, and that fact had to be put across to the public to combat media hysteria.

There was an increasing demand for rehoming over the survey period. High value horse owning respondents sent a total of more than 400 horses for rehoming from 2005 to 2010. Rehoming capacity was limited and as seen in the USA, demand can rapidly exceed the welfare societies' ability to provide it.

The most important conclusion was, that there is a need for annual demographic data compilation and review of the numbers of unwanted horses and ponies within the horse industry to assist policy makers and legislators.

## Discussion

These three examples have arbitrarily been chosen out of coarse numbers of publications and commentaries. In spite of the small number, they nevertheless should allow a fairly comprehensive review as they illustrate both different situations and approaches and most cited problems.

For one thing, one can conclude that the ex-racehorse is an integral part of racing and breeding. In the second place, we must take the fact in account that the welfare of all animals, including racing animals, is important to the community (Symons 2012).

Obviously and unanimously, most important is to have a reliable control over the number of horses concerned. This certainly is quite a demanding task, but it will be the only mean for being able to discuss things matter of factly, as misleading figures and statistics about the destination of retired racehorses are often quoted by animal welfare groups. Collating this data will help to ensure the industry is represented truthfully (Stewart 2014).

The summary of the discussions at the meeting of the IFTB in Newmarket 2012 also agreed to monitor the unwanted horse population around the world. Luckily, for such requirements, in our days we can rely on best developed information technologies and it is interesting and satisfying that already work has been done in this field (e.g, Moser 2014). It seems to be highly commendable to apply such tools to the registration of Thoroughbreds anywhere. In this field, quite progressive work has already been done in Australia with the introduction of national regulations to capture enhanced information about the transition of Thoroughbreds to a life after racing. In 2014, the Australian Racing Board (ARB) introduced a new rule making it compulsory for owners to report the retirement of their racehorse within 30 days (Paulick Report 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014). Now, the managing owner of each racehorse is responsible for advising the reason for their horse's retirement and their plans for the horse beyond its racing career. Under the newly introduced Australian Rule of Racing 64JA, the managing owner of each horse is required to notify the industry's data provider (Racing Information Services Australia, RISA), on the retirement of their horse. The 'retirement of racehorse' form can be found at the RISA website [www.risa.com.au](http://www.risa.com.au) under the Registrar of Racehorses/Forms page.

Further, one certainly must acknowledge that in all the cited examples, great and sophisticated efforts have been made. However, it seems not to be easy to please all parties. In the USA for instance, the racing industry is said to be damned by sensitized citizenry because of the lack of attention to animal welfare (Hovdey 2012). But in Australia, the Racing Board is criticized by some commentators because it commissioned the investigation to Renée Geelen (comments to her blog 2014):

- *"Really? This Renee Geelen is a thoroughbred consultant who has her own business de Kabat Bloodstock and one of her clients is the Australian Racing Board.... Perhaps we can see some research from an independent of industry person."*

- *"This is not unbiased and the information is collected by those with a vested interest in racing."*

- *"Credibility is seriously lacking."*

With this, it is once more proven that one can't be everybody's darling – however, also a well known fact for ages (*Nemo placet omnibus*).

Beside this, the West Australian vet Symons already mentioned in 2012 that welfare has been an issue for many years and that it is now time to collate the research performed throughout the world, to make sense of the findings and use them for the benefit of all parties. This was proven true already two years later, as the "Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses" fostered public debate with actions both in the National Museum of Australia and at the Magic Millions sales and racing event in Brisbane, to raise awareness of the need for a retirement plan to prevent horses being slaughtered for pet food.



Can of 'Horsielicious: the racing industry's retirement plan in a can', 2014. Donated by the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses. National Museum of Australia. Photo: Jason McCarthy.

In spite of all the endeavors of the industry, it obviously is difficult to discuss matters with some activists reasonably, moreover as some of those propagandize with outright lies (Geelen 2014).

One has to find a practicable way with all these activities of self-designated welfare and animal rights organizations. According to Voss (2015), it can be difficult in this alphabet soup to distinguish one group from one another. That's why, the recent announcement that the Jockey Club and Breeders' Cup would join forces with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), must find interest. This organization is not against racing but wants it done

well and humanely. Beside this, the HSUS does have a number of concerns also in regard to our endeavors; "over-breeding, breeding for soundness, and 2-year-old racing" are mentioned here. However, the HSUS is said to be a reasonable and professional organization that has a long history of working with industry groups to affect realistic and meaningful reforms. It has good footing politically as well and the coalition for political strategies is expected to be a mutually beneficial one. Remarkable might also be, that in 2014, HSUS reported over \$ 186 million in donations and assets and dedicated over \$ 61 million to advocacy (Voss 2015).

A comparable solution has also been found in Great Britain, where World Horse Welfare and British Horseracing's official charity, Retraining of Racehorses (RoR), have agreed to collaborate on a pilot scheme (Anon. 2014). The aim is for World Horse Welfare, a group of independent welfare advisers to the British Horseracing Authority and the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), to use its expertise in preparing horses for new lives in loving homes and rehome them through its rehoming scheme. The scheme is being completely funded by RoR and this service is in addition to World Horse Welfare's existing UK rescue and rehoming operations. The goals of these charities are the same in terms of wanting to ensure that those animals which provide so much pleasure on the racecourse are suitably catered for when their racing career is over (Anon. 2014).

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Ward Young, "Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses" communications manager, with cans of 'Horselicious' at the Magic Millions sales and racing event in Brisbane on 9 January 2014.

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