



KENTUCKY

The Racetrack: A Changing Perspective

RECENTLY A VETERINARY colleague remarked that a horse that had sustained a minor laceration in the starting gate had been scratched. While there was no expectation that the horse's performance would be impacted, she could not justify permitting an injured horse to race. If the same incident had occurred several years earlier, it is unlikely she would have recommended the scratch. This incident illustrates a philosophical shift that has occurred in horse racing and the resulting requirement that we defend why a horse races rather than why it doesn't.

Subtly and over time, a critical question for this industry has evolved from "can a horse race with a medical condition?" to "should a horse race with a medical condition?" The next question looming on the horizon is "should a horse race that has had a medical condition in the past?" The ground is shifting beneath our feet as we as veterinarians and the horse racing industry try to answer these questions to the satisfaction of the public and personal conscience.

Veterinary medical progress has enhanced our diagnostic capabilities in the detection of minor injuries and has afforded recovery from numerous major injuries previously considered life-threatening. Factor in our understanding of the cumulative nature of catastrophic injuries—that these injuries develop over time and perhaps without any clinical signs—and it becomes difficult to know with any degree of certainty what the responsible course is. Will an argument be put forth that if a horse has been injured in any capacity it should never race again?

Some horses sustain injuries, recover, and return to competition; others don't. Of the horses that return to competition, some compete successfully; some don't. But what of the horses not injured? Some compete successfully; some don't. They are all individuals, and they respond best when treated that way.

Thoughtful, ethical, responsible decisions on a case-by-case basis should be the standard.

When I first started working as a racetrack regulatory veterinarian, "racing soundness" was defined as the ability of a horse to complete a race. This was a difficult concept, as racing soundness could not be identified until after a race. Raised eyebrows at the pre-race exam were typically met with the trainer's exhortation, "Don't worry, Doc. This horse'll win." And even when the winner did limp into the Winner's Circle, the horse had just proved its ability to compete successfully and retained its classification as "racing sound." Racing soundness was associated with the ability of a horse to perform to expectations rather than with the actual health or welfare of the animal. Risk management was directed at the bettor and not the horse.

Times have clearly changed. The definition of racing soundness is now predicated on equine health, safety, and welfare. The health of horse racing is directly tied to the health of the horses. Every industry stakeholder has an incentive to identify and engage in practices that promote responsible stewardship of the racehorse. The industry has been engaged in some critical self-evaluation, and change is being embraced. The traditions of racing have collided with the frontiers of science, and the horse is the ultimate beneficiary.

Many changes in horse racing have occurred in the last 20 years—much of which I could not have foreseen, but little that I regret. The challenges facing this industry are as great as the opportunities. I do know that my decision to be a part of this grand sport was, pardon the pun, a sound one.

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