

The Blood-Horse, September 24, 2007

Commentary: Culture Change

Fifty years ago, the average number of lifetime starts per runner was more than 40. Now, shockingly, it is less than 14. Why? What has changed so much?

Conventional wisdom is that the Thoroughbred breed had become more fragile as we have emphasized speed and early maturity over soundness and stamina. But on the other hand, we are working with the same basic gene pool we had 30 years ago. Horses like Nashua, Bold Ruler, Damascus, Northern Dancer, Native Dancer, and Hail to Reason were tough as nails, but their descendants are soft as butter.

However, in Europe and Australia horses are much heartier. Many are American-bred. Consider the top filly Finsceal Beo, by American-as-apple-pie [Mr. Greeley](#). She won the Stan James English One Thousand Guineas (Eng-I) May 5, came back a week later to just miss in the French equivalent, and then two weeks later won the Boylesport Irish One Thousand Guineas (Ire-I). I myself have U.S.-breds training in England that routinely run every seven to 14 days. We can no longer just point to pedigree as the reason our horses are weaker, because our pedigrees in other locations are producing tougher horses.

It occurred to me that perhaps the racetracks have changed or become harder over the last 30 years, resulting in more injuries. I consulted racetrack maintenance guru Joe King who explained that for the most part, conventional dirt tracks have not changed much over the past 30 years. It's not the tracks.

Soundness is not the only issue or even the biggest reason why horses run less nowadays. Horses are not as tough constitutionally as they used to be. Every time they run a big race, they seem to be knocked out for weeks. Again, why?

It is my belief that our horses are over-medicated to the point that they are seriously weakened. Over the last 30 years, horses have received more and more medication and have raced less and less. The drugs not only don't work; they are counter-productive. Just look at other countries where they medicate less and race more. All drugs are toxic and our 2- and 3-year-old horses receive dozens of drugs in a given month. My average vet bill here is more than \$800 per month.

The trainers are letting the vets run the game. The real problem is not illegal drugs, but the legal ones that they train and race on. Salix and Bute are given out like candy. These drugs have major side effects; just ask the humans who take them. Salix, which is used for works as well as races by many trainers, is a diuretic that depletes minerals and dehydrates a horse. Bute causes ulcers, a common ailment on the backstretch. Horses need more time to recover from their drug "hangover" after a race.

I believe another contributing factor is shoeing. This is not just my pet theory, but the opinion of many prominent veterinarians and blacksmiths. We have changed the way we shoe horses over the last 30 years. Simply put, horses today don't have as much heel as they used to. This causes "crushed heel syndrome," recently described

in an issue of *The Blood-Horse*. The basic theory here is that a horse's coffin bone needs to be parallel to the ground. If it is not, it causes all kinds of problems, especially in the hock, stifle, and hips. If you look at pictures of old-time horses, they have less toe and a lot more heel, especially behind.

Finally, I believe there is a tendency by trainers to be too aware of their win percentage stats. Trainers don't want to lose. You see first time starters showing four to five months of breezes. That's ridiculous. Years ago, trainers and handicappers were acutely aware of form cycles. Horses would run throughout the year, often every seven, 10, or 14 days, and they would go in and out of form. But they would keep running. When a horse got good, the trainer was desperate to run him "right back" while he was good. Horses don't "bounce" if you run them back quickly. Witness the very formful Preakness (gr. I) run two weeks after the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (gr. I).

So what's the bottom line?

With the advent of synthetic tracks, there will be no excuse for horses to run as seldom as they do now. But we will need to wean ourselves off the tremendously counter-productive drug culture. Salix should be banned, period. And blacksmiths—please—more heel!

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