

There's hope for racing's rejects



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In recent years, a fair amount of press has been devoted to animal rights groups and individuals who oppose various aspects of horseracing. Over-drugging, racing 2-year-olds, dangerous track surfaces, excessive whip use, Breeders' Cup Sprint disasters—all are frequent targets.

Somewhat less publicized, yet a regrettably genuine byproduct of the industry, is the wretched fate of the racehorse once it has left the track for good.

It's probably just as well that no official numbers exist to indicate how many sound thoroughbreds with miserable race records are sent to the killers, or left to languish in a remote pasture. (There's also no telling how many auction horses are doomed to a similar end.)

Trainers and owners will quickly remind you that the bottom line in these cases is exactly that: the bottom line. What outsiders often fail to recognize is that few horsemen's budgets enable them to provide continued care for the enormous majority of horses who are incapable of generating income. Nor can they afford the time needed to place each horse with owners outside the industry.

Is there any hope, then, for reducing the premature deaths of racing's rejects?

Maybe. And there's even a chance that some dog racing folks will show us how.

Veterinarian and longtime thoroughbred breeder Demarious Frey represents the greyhound section of the Texas Racing Commission. In an effort to curtail widespread use of euthanasia to cull third-rate performers, Frey has pushed through a rule requiring state kennel owners to inform track officials of a dog's destination after its racing career has ended.

Although a similar measure was enacted two years ago at greyhound racing's national level, it's never been enforceable. But Frey's rule will be sanctioned by the Texas panel, so kennel owners will have to comply—or lose their track privileges.

Just how much of a logistical implausibility this endeavor could turn into is anybody's guess. What's to prevent kennel owners from lying? Who's going to conduct the requisite follow-up visits? And where will the extra money come from to fund this potentially costly undertaking?

In principal, the adoption of a comparable rule might seem like a good idea for horseracing. In practice, the logistics would be even more overwhelming.

But the concept warrants consideration. I'd like to think that even among some trainers—who would ultimately shoulder the staggering task of finding outside owners for washed-up runners—there exists a nagging distaste for needlessly destroying a creature whose destiny was never within its control to begin with.

At the very least, Frey's action will prolong the lives of a minor number of retired greyhounds. And if there's any conceivable way to adapt the rule to rehabilitate some unwanted thoroughbreds, too, it's worth pursuing.

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