A Battle to the Wire: The Controversary Over Horse Racing and How the Industry Can Move Forward into the Future

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The final race of the 2019 Breeder's Cup was about to begin at Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, California. Under the glow of the looming sunset, horsemen, veterinarians, track management and fans alike held their breaths as the horses rocketed from the gate in a display of raw power and beauty. Under intense scrutiny from the California state government, Santa Anita had taken every precautionary measure possible to ensure that the biggest two-day event in racing would go off without incident. Thirty vets were assembled to observe horses during and after training in the week leading up to the Breeder's Cup, and the race contenders were subjected to a vigorous pre-race veterinary examination before receiving the final "OK" to compete. A close friend of mine was forced to scratch his horse from competition after one such pre-race exam. Luis trained a horse named Imperial Hint, a five-year-old horse that had captured his last two races and was one of the race favorites in the $2,000,000 Breeder's Cup Sprint Stakes. In the days leading up to the race, veterinarians discovered a slight tenderness in the horse's coronet band, the junction between the hoof and hairline on the horse's ankle, and forbade the horse from competing in that weekend's event. Luis protested that he knew his horse better than anyone and that even the vets could see for themselves every morning that Imperial Hint was training soundly up to the race. However, the vet's decision was irrefutable. In an instant, Luis and the horse's eighty-year-old owner hung their heads in disappointment, their year-long dream of championship glory buried in the California sands.

Furthermore, despite all of Santa Anita's efforts, and despite the fact that every horse had come back safely in all

14 Breeder's Cup races between the two-day event, the one thing that everyone had been dreading happened in the final race of the day: a mere sixteenth of mile from the finish line, Mongolian Groom's hind leg shattered. As animal rights advocates around the nation roared in fury, the sport that had played such an important part of my life was suddenly in jeopardy.

Who was to take the blame for the tragic death of Mongolian Groom? The horsemen? The racetracks? The fact is, there isn't one simple response to this crisis. A lack of a national organization to implement the rules and regulations, in addition to several other factors including track surface, decades of questionable breeding practices, as well as an overwhelming appetite for greed that consumes the sport are all to be blamed for the current state of turmoil facing the horse racing industry.

Horse racing is no stranger to controversy, and the industry that employs 1.7 million people and generates $122 billion in revenue every year began its downward spiral in the winter of 2018-2019 (Bhattacharji). While there are deaths recorded at every track around the country, Santa Anita suddenly became the target of national criticism after 25 horses were euthanized at the Southern California racetrack over a six-month period. The owners of the racetrack, the Stronach Group, responded by instituting a policy of zero-tolerance on race day medication.
They announced:

> The Stronach Group has long been a strong advocate for the abolishment of race-day medication, but we will wait no longer for the industry to come together as one to institute these changes. Nor will we wait for the legislation required to undertake this paradigm shift. We are taking a stand and fully recognize

> just how disruptive this might be (Stronach Group).

In addition to the new race-day medication regulations, the Stronach Group also brought in Mick Peterson, director of the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Equine Programs, and Racing Services Testing Lab (RSTL), to evaluate the Santa Anita track surface. "Peterson noted that heavy winter rains had led to track 'segregation,' a process in which fine material in the top surface cushion moves to the inside rail as water washes across the track surface" (Kane). It's no surprise the track was producing an inconsistent, and inevitably unsafe surface. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in February 2019 that Southern California hadn't experienced such high levels of precipitation since 1948 (Fry, Robbins). Track managers employ an array of techniques for managing moisture in the track surface, such as sealing water out during wet weather by "harrowing" or smoothing over the surface. However,

> The issue is that moisture levels in the track surface can still change dramatically throughout a race day, especially when heavy rainfall alternates with bright sun and desert winds. The top layer, called the cushion, is soft and granular, to dampen the impact on the horse's foot; the one below, called the pad, is harder and more compact, allowing for more "push-off " of the hoof (Leste-Lasserre).

Horses are able adjust to different track surfaces as long as they're consistent, but the risk for injuries increases if track characteristics change from stride to stride.

Since Santa Anita has implemented these new changes in drug policy and assessed the surface, there has been a slight improvement in the figures from last winter's disastrous meet.

As of April 2020, Santa Anita has counted 11 deaths from their 2019-2020 winter race meet, all of which occurred during morning training hours and none during the afternoon races. The Stronach group reported in a press release that "there has been a 64 percent reduction in catastrophic injuries at Santa Anita Park this year, and we have not had a single fatality during racing on our main track for the entirety of this season."

Decades of unscrupulous breeding practices have also led to the degeneration of the Thoroughbred horse. First, there are many more horses racing in the early 21st century: 21,500 Thoroughbred foals were born in 2018 compared to 10,000 foals born in 1950. There is also an enormous emphasis on breeding for speed. Whereas, 50 years ago people were breeding horses for stamina and durability, now the goal is to seemingly create a faster animal, no matter how unsound the horse may be. Dan Rosenberg, the President of Three Chimneys, a prestigious horse-breeding farm in Midway, Kentucky, stated: "The market wants a faster, earlier-maturing **horse,** but there is an incompatibility between **speed** and durability" (Kluger). There are horses being bred that might have shown brilliant speed on the track, but were born with confirmation flaws that caused these individuals and their future offspring to become more pre-disposed to injury. Thoroughbreds are also being heavily inbred in order to keep the most desirable and profitable genetics in the bloodline. In a study conducted in 2011 by Dr. Binns of the Horse Genome Project, results "showed that there had been a small but significant (i.e. real) increase in inbreeding over the past 40 years, and that most of the increase was from the mid-1990s to present" (Walker). Stallions, or studs, used for breeding, that were being bred to 40-50 mares per season in the 1960s are now being bred to 100-150 per breeding season. Walker explains:

> Nowadays, high quality stallions are also "shuttled" around the world to cover mares, for example, being sent to the southern hemisphere to breed with mares during the quiet season for breeding in the northern hemisphere. This in part is to meet the modern demand for producing yearlings that sell for high prices at auction rather than the previous breeding goal of producing superior racehorses. Overall that means fewer stallions are siring a greater proportion of offspring (Walker).

Unfortunately, the breeding industry and the subject of greed are inextricably linked. Even though the purse for the Kentucky Derby is $2,000,000, the real profits for horse owners start churning in after the Derby winner is retired and sent to the breeding shed. Once standing at stud, the Derby victor can command a fee as high as $50,000 per horse bred. Tapit, the leading stallion of 2014, 2015, and 2016, has produced over 28 horses to sell for at least $1,00,000 in the sales ring. He stands for a stud fee of a whopping $200,000. A beautiful and precocious but unsound runner, Tapit was retired after making only six starts on the track due to recurring injury. Moreover, the profits breeders can make from the horse auctions alone are astronomical. A top seller of 2019 was a yearling, or a one-year-old horse, sired by the 2015 Triple Crown winner American Pharoah (listed for a $200,000 stud fee). The young horse sold for $8.2 million at the boutique Keeneland September Yearling Sale without ever setting a foot on the racetrack. The exorbitant price of horses in the sales ring, therefore, takes the focus away from breeding durable and hearty athletes and instead on producing flashy horses with commercial pedigrees.

A possible solution to horse racing's current crisis could come in the form of the National Horse Racing Reform Act.

As of October 2019, one third of the House of Representatives have signed the bill, sponsored by New York Congressman Paul Tonko and Kentucky Congressman Andy Barr. Additionally, 135 of the industry's leading trainers have pledged their support for the revolutionary form of legislation. The Horse Racing Integrity Act would create a unified body that would uphold consistent drug rules and testing. As of this year, the horse racing industry is currently regulated by 38 different racing jurisdictions across the U.S, which limits regulators' effective management of the many issues involved in the health and safety of racehorses (Smeallie). The statutes of what drugs are permitted and the withdrawal times for certain drugs differ on a state by state basis. The popular anti-inflammatory Phenylbutazone (Bute), is allowed to be administered within 24 hours of a race in Maryland, 48-hours before competition in New York, and most recently, seven days before race in California.

An issue with the Horse Racing Reform Act, however, is that it will prohibit all race-day medications, including the commonly-used diuretic, Lasix, or Furosemide. Lasix is a medication which has been at the heart of the horse racing controversy since its inception in the late 1960s. The media has long harped on the tune that horse trainers are "drugging their horses" with Lasix, despite the fact that the medication is legally sanctioned by every racing jurisdiction in the country. Lasix is administered to Thoroughbreds in racing to help prevent them from bleeding through their nose as a result of exercise-induced pulmonary hemorrhage (EIPH), a syndrome caused by the rupture of capillaries in their lungs due to high-stress athletic competition. It's estimated that 55-95% of Thoroughbreds experience some level of EIPH, but only 4% are considered "serious bleeders," where the blood can visibly be seen coming out of the nostrils following exercise (Fernando). Lasix is used to lower stress on the organs by decreasing the amount of water retained in the

body before a horse competes and this decrease in stress allows most horses to run without any bleeding (Bright).
The drug first gained national prominence after veterinarian Alex Harthill gave it to 1964 Kentucky Derby winner Northern Dancer and was seen as the miracle remedy for EIPH. Jeff Blea, a Southern California-based veterinarian and chairman of the American Association of Equine Practitioners' racing committee, told *USA Today* in an April 2019 article that Lasix is "the only medication we know of that scientifically reduces or mitigates EIPH in Thoroughbred racehorses… It's so prevalent in American racing partially because it works" (Wolken). One of the most reliable studies on Lasix was conducted by Dr. Ken Hinchcliff of the University of Melbourne in South Africa. Hinchcliff's results were published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association in July of 2009. The study proved that Lasix was highly effective in alleviating the condition of EIPH in racehorses. There were two races conducted, and horses were randomly selected to receive either Lasix of a placebo saline solution. Those horses receiving Lasix in the first race would then receive the saline in the second and vice versa. "The study found that horses given the saline solution were far more likely to develop EIPH, and almost 68% of the horses that bled when given the saline had a reduction in the EIPH severity when given Lasix" (Bright).

To a person unfamiliar with horse-racing or Lasix, the idea of racing horses may appear cruel and unnecessary if there's a feasibility of internal hemorrhaging occurring in its athletes. The history of this ailment in Thoroughbred horses hails back hundreds of years to the original foundation of the breed in the 18th century. One of the breed's founding stallions, the Darley Arabian, was the father of Bartlett's Childers, who became one of the great racehorse-producing stallions of the 1700s and was notorious for being terrible bleeder

(Fernando). Bartlett's Childers suffered so terribly from EIPH that he never raced, however, he was bred and continued to pass on his genetic predisposition to bleeding to his offspring.

Racehorses from Europe, which banned race-day Lasix, are frequently sent to American horse trainers because the United States is the only nation in the world to allow the treatment of Lasix and the horses can perform to the best of their abilities without suffering. Perhaps a compromise can be formed between horsemen and state to allow the treatment of Lasix to horses that have been verified by a veterinarian to bleed or fall into the category of a "serious bleeder." Otherwise, it would appear to be inhumane to willingly allow an animal to damage the capillaries in its lungs and return from a race gushing blood out of its nostrils. Kentucky Derby-winning trainer Barclay Tagg summed up the Lasix debate best:

> Sure, I'd be for getting rid of Lasix, if they found another way to treat bleeders that works. Lasix, if used properly, is not as debilitating as people think, either. If they are treated right the next few days after a race and get plenty of fresh water, an electrolyte jug the day after, and get some grazing, they rebound quickly. (Fernando)

Following the death of Mongolian Groom on horseracing's biggest stage, anyone involved in the horse racing industry, from trainers to breeders to owners, were suddenly overwhelmed with dread. I encourage all those in the industry to acknowledge and hold ourselves accountable for the grieve mistakes we've made and to amend our ways moving forward into the future. Racing should strain to provide the safest and most consistent surfaces for its' animals to run on, take cues from the past in breeding a stronger and more durable breed of horse, as well as work

with politicians to construct the most efficient and uniformed racing jurisdiction to set the standard in our sport for the years to come. These magnificent animals, which were truly born to run and compete, deserve the safest platform we can provide for them so that every young child can experience the thrill of seeing these great athletes surge down the homestretch. Before the glory and before the money, the horses come first. Seven-time leading trainer Todd Pletcher, who conditioned the winner of Mongolian Groom's race, Vino Rosso, implored the industry on a recent Thoroughbred Daily News' podcast to do whatever it takes to save the lives of our athletes:

> We all know that there's nothing we can do that is absolutely going to prevent breakdowns from happening, but I do think we can dramatically reduce it and every effort has to be made to do that…It's a crisis. We have to get this thing sorted out and do a lot better than we're doing now.

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