

In My Opinion

Still An Unacceptable Situation

By Monica Bencal

If you read my column last month you heard all about my efforts to re-home the last standardbred my husband Bob trained. His name was Genius At Work, and through the combined efforts of Jeff Gural, Freddie Hudson, Judy Bokman and her crew at the SRF, he now has a job with the New York City Mounted Police Unit. It is truly a wonderful and heartwarming story.

Unfortunately, that happy ending does not happen enough in the Standardbred Industry. In fact, it is estimated that, at any given time, 92% of retired standardbreds are at risk of ending up in a kill pen. In my opinion, The Standardbred Retirement Foundation hit the nail on the head when it posted this statement on their website: "Although horse racing is a multi-billion dollar business, the Standardbred racing industry has made no provision to support these grand horses when their racing careers come to an end." The sad fact is that even though our industry has started to address this situation, in my opinion, harness racing is still not focusing enough time, energy, and money toward this problem.

As always, when you are trying to change a situation, people must first acknowledge that there is a problem that needs fixing. I think the time to debate this is over. All one needs to do to realize that this is still an ongoing problem is to check their social media feed. If you are like me, there are at least 3-4 posts from a standardbred rescue site asking for donations to bail out one of our own from a kill pen. In our industry, it is an open secret that many of the horses that have retired from racing, and even those that were never competitive as racehorses, are sold to dealers. A large majority of these horses are then resold to kill buyers. Kill buyers buy these horses with the sole purpose of sending them to the slaughterhouse. The suffering of these animals is often compounded by the fact that they travel to their death in dark, cramped trailers with little to no food or water.

"The time is always right to do what's right."

~ Martin Luther King



If a horse is lucky enough to be spared the fate of the slaughterhouse, that does not mean that a retired racehorse will enjoy an idyllic retirement on a farm with lush, green pastures for the rest of his or her life. These horses, often with recent and painful injuries from racing, are sold to people who think of them as a piece of machinery. Therefore, instead of being given time to recover from their injuries, they are immediately put to work pulling heavy plows in a field. When the inevitable happens, and their broken and abused bodies can no longer tolerate the hard work they are asked to do, they once again end up in a kill pen to be auctioned off to slaughterhouse dealers.

Even if a retired standardbred is re-homed through one of the few dedicated but underfunded agencies that exist, that does not guarantee that this horse is forever safe. According to figures put out by the Standardbred Retirement Foundation (SRF), only 8.5% of horses rehomed find their forever home with their first family. Unfortunately, that means that 91.5% of these horses are at risk again. As the SRF stated in its recent email, if a Standardbred horse doesn't have a lifetime protective guardian, they are at risk again of ending up in a kill pen.

These scenarios are not only sad, they are also no longer acceptable. An industry that breeds an animal, for the sole purpose of making money, cannot then toss that same animal away like a piece of yesterday's trash when it no longer serves our purpose. In today's world, with the advent of social media, the cruelty our standardbreds endure when they are no longer able to race is out in plain view. In my opinion, as an industry we can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the issue of Animal Welfare.

No longer turning a blind eye to the issue of Animal Welfare requires us to do two (2) things: First, we need to recognize that a problem exists. Then, we need to do something. Fortunately, some industry leaders are beginning to realize the harness racing industry needs to be proactive in this area. However, what is even more important than changing the public's perception is actually changing the practices that make us a cruel industry. Just putting out public relation pieces about how the Harness Racing industry is going to try to address this problem, without substantial progress, will not make any difference in the public's perception of our industry.

I do want to give the USTA and certain individuals credit. When the public became outraged about the horrific events in Killean Cut Kid's life as a retired standardbred (September 2017), industry leaders came together the very next month at Lexington's Red Mile. In the year and a half since, real progress has been made: An entity (the Standardbred Transition Alliance) has been formed; A Board of Directors and Committees has also been formed; In addition, some funding has actually been raised. While these things are positive steps toward some type of comprehensive industry-wide solution, I believe we need to do more AND we need to find a way to implement real solutions more quickly than we are currently are doing.

My belief that we need to do more, and do it more quickly is borne out by the following statistics: In the year and a half (18 months) since the concept of the STA was announced, I estimate that approximately 6,998 standardbreds were sent to slaughterhouses in Mexico and Canada.(1) If you look at statistics on a yearly basis, the numbers are equally as appalling. It is estimated that approximately 8,000 standards are bred each year. In 2018, it has also been estimated that 4,830 standardbreds were sent to death via a slaughterhouse. So according to these statistics, 60% of the standardbreds bred each year will meet their death in a slaughterhouse. So according to these figures, while it seems that we in the harness racing industry seem to have realized that this issue needs to be addressed, I am not so sure that we realize there is an URGENT need for this issue to be addressed. We need to speed up the process of finding real solutions.

Before I get started on what I believe are some possible solutions, let me state here unequivocally that I do not believe the people in harness racing are cruel. Some of the kindest and most generous people I know are in harness racing. Unfortunately, that is not the message we are sending to the public. The delay in implementing solutions in the area of Animal Welfare is telling the public a different story. The problem as I see it, is in the implementation of solutions. I would like to emphasize this point again: If we want to change public opinion, we must implement solutions, and we must implement these solutions in a timely manner.

First: I believe that we need to make every segment in harness racing (breeders, sales companies, owners, trainers, drivers and racetracks) contribute to the issue of Animal Welfare. Undertaking this mission is a huge financial responsibility. To make a difference, real dollars need to be available for any effort made in this area. In my opinion, it has already been proven that voluntary contributions do not raise enough money to adequately address the problem. Each segment of the standardbred industry must be made to pay their fair share toward this effort. Spreading the financial burden amongst all industry segments, also ensures that one industry segment (like racing) is not unduly taxed, while another area (breeding) pays nothing. Each one of these segments of the industry uses the standardbred horse to try and make a profit, therefore in my opinion, each one of these segments needs to contribute to the care of our animals once they can no longer serve our purpose.



Second: I believe that any solutions our leaders come up with must be mandated legislatively. This can be done by the USTA alone by passing a by-law, or the USTA can recruit legislators to help with these efforts so that the burden of caring for these retired standardbreds is shared equally by all segments of the industry. Again, voluntary compliance with regards to helping shoulder this burden has not proved successful. We are not alone in our inability to voluntarily fund Animal Welfare reforms. Just yesterday, the Jockey Club put out a statement entitled "Vision 2025 To Prosper, Horse Racing Needs Comprehensive Reform." In that statement, they outlined several issues that need to be addressed in thoroughbred racing. With regards to the issue of Animal Welfare, the Jockey Club wrote, "The Thoroughbred industry has embraced the responsibility of care of Thoroughbreds after their racing and breeding careers through important yet largely voluntary contributions to organizations such as the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance. Unfortunately, not all segments of the industry contribute equally, especially the end users at the racetrack, which amounts to only about 5% of totals. All aspects of the industry should contribute to aftercare throughout the course of the horse's life." We suffer the same problem as the thoroughbred industry. The problem, as I see it is two-fold: Voluntary contributions do not raise the enough funds to meet the burden of taking care of our retired standardbreds, and, the burden is not shared equally by each segment in the industry.

Third: We as an industry also need to do more to support current legislative efforts that will help the harness racing industry pass much-needed reforms. Currently, there are two such bills:

The SAFE Act of 2019 (HR 961) – This bill would prohibit any horse slaughter plant from opening. It would also prohibit the sale and transport of horses and horse parts in the US and abroad for the purpose of human consumption. (The Paulick Report, 2/01/2019)

The Horseracing Integrity Act of 2019 (HR 1754) – This bill establishes the Horseracing Anti-Doping and Medication Control Authority. This authority will oversee anti-doping and medication control rules, implement a prohibition on the administration of any substance within 24 hours of racing. It would also establish testing and laboratory standards.

I am the first to acknowledge that we are beginning to address the issue of Animal Welfare in harness racing. Unfortunately, I believe that we are still not doing enough. We need to speed up the process of finding and implementing real solutions if the industry is to repair its image. In addition, our leaders need to be transparent and accountable to the membership about what is being done, how this is to be funded, and who is responsible for instituting these changes. Since the membership also serves as ambassadors to the general public, everyone in harness needs to be kept in the loop about what is happening with the after-care of our standardbreds. Only by attacking this issue head on can we hope to repair the public's negative perception of harness racing.

1
standardbreds sent to slaughterhouses in Mexico and Canada come from the following sources: The Horse Trade Report (Gov't of Canada), the USDA Market News, the US to Mexico Livestock Weekly Report Summary and the Safe Act Bill. The calculations are as follows: Add documented numbers: Total Breeds sent to slaughter from September 2017 to December 2017 = 16,000; Total Breeds sent to slaughter for all of 2018 = 80,500; Use estimated number base on last year figures for Total Breeds sent to slaughter for the first 3 month of 2019 = 20,125. Add: 16,000 + 80,500 + 20,125 = 116,625. Multiply this number (116,625) with the estimated number of standardbreds in the slaughterhouse pipeline (6% per the Safe Act Bill). The result is that it is estimated that 6,998 standardbreds have been sent to slaughter in the past 18 months.

This article regarding Animal Welfare in the Standardbred Industry is the 5th article in a series that is meant to highlight the problems harness racing faces with the hope that real solutions can be implemented. The opinions in the article are solely those of the author. Any comments or suggestions can be left in the feedback section of the USHRAA newsletter.