

Aqueduct's Horseracing Problem

Aqueduct has gotten much media attention recently, and not in a positive way. Since the 2014/15 winter meet started, 12 horses have died in a span of 22 days, but horses aren't the only athletes suffering. Every time a horse breaks down, a jockey gets thrown off his or her mount and reporting on the rider's health has not only been hard to find, but forgotten throughout the reporting of the horse breakdowns like people forget that Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Europe on horseback.

Aqueduct's breakdown rate is 4 times the national average, but it's not the only problem track, and jockeys are placed in grave danger due to the lack of accountable regulations by state and local officials. Jockeys, one of the strongest and most resilient in the realm of sports, have been casually forgotten.

Out of the about 38 incidents, eleven horses broke down and collapsed during a race at Aqueduct, 24 horses were pulled up by the jockey, and thirteen horses were saved to retirement or other due to the jockey stopping the horse. Of the 20 jockeys that were involved in the Aqueduct incidents, most came back to ride in less than 3 days, four were seriously injured, and two have yet to ride again. Thanks to the athletes who risk their lives daily for people's entertainment, 10 horses were saved from euthanasia, and thus should be hailed as heroes.

The epidemic of allowing incapable horses to run in races needs to be repaired, at the New York Racing Association and nationwide. How are horses coming in to race with injuries that leave them incapable of finishing a race, being allowed to run in the first place, risking both athlete and horse lives? All jockeys can do is hold the horses up, but when horses go straight to the ground because the injury is too much to bear, a person can lose his or her life.

Recently on February 6 in Tampa Bay Downs, Fla. there was a 4-horse spill caused by the breakdown and collapse of a horse that caused a chain reaction. It was, yet again, a cheap claiming race. Updates on the four jockeys have yet to come out, although they were reported as "being able to move their limbs." More detail was given on the horses involved.

The Jockey's Guild has said they do not have knowledge of data from racetracks when a jockey is injured, and only when a jockey files a disability claim or the racetrack voluntarily provides them with information are they informed.

NYRA and the Racing and Wagering Board seem to not know how to address the breakdowns because according to many horsemen, the new rules implemented this winter does nothing to address horse health itself. The heterogeneity of racing rules that differ considerably from state to state prevent the creation of a unifying national database that helps keep track of horses and jockeys alike. Without addressing these major problems, there is no way to compare and contrast initiatives taken that have a positive or negative effect on athlete injuries, and no way to keep jockeys safe from sore horses.

California's Horse Racing Board has taken the initiative to study this gap in safety measures and have produced a study which concludes that over 50% of jockeys sustain injuries when a horse has a catastrophic injury or sudden death during a race.

In November 2014, Mike Luzzi, a 30-year veteran jockey of New York and winner of over 3,400 races was hurt by his mount in the Aqueduct paddock and sent to Jamaica hospital with life-threatening injuries. A shattered pelvis, broken leg, and nine blood transfusions later, NYRA has yet to post on their news outlets that the rider was hurt during the running of their races, and that he is recovering from the injuries that almost claimed his life. The day Luzzi was racing, the wind speed was at a sustained 30 mph, with gusts reaching 50 mph, a situation where in the past, NYRA has cancelled racing stating safety concerns for jockeys and horses, but for some reason they continued to race on this day.

Shewreckstheplace, one of the latest equine casualties at Aqueduct and a horse I have ridden in the past, was a winless mare forced to "run for checks." This is a common occurrence where lower-tiered trainers have to run their horses in order to pay for the feed, vet, and stall bills. With the inflated casino purses, a third, or fourth place finish is good enough to maintain a horse on the track. The mare was on the NYRA vet's list on April, 25 2014 after being pulled up during a race, and returned to racing in July, out of state. She was being run on average every 17th day since then, had an almost 3-month layoff from October to December, and went back to racing frequently, consequently leading to her catastrophic injury on January 4. The jockey, Angel Cruz was sensitive enough to pull the horse up before the wire, but the mare was later euthanized.

How did Shewreckstheplace not raise red flags with her layoffs and vet list history? How do some trainers, who have as many as five catastrophic injury horse deaths a year still get to race their horses without being fined or reprimanded in some way? How are unsafe horses getting to the races? That is the question.

The cause needs to be addressed, not the symptom. Horses need to be logged more often, jockeys need to be taken seriously and given a larger role in the conversation; the Gaming Commission's Horse Incident Database is a good start and should be expanded nationally. Finally, trainers and owners must be reprimanded for the casualty of the horses in their care and take responsibility.