

Is it ethical to continue to race horses?

IN 2006 nine horses died at the Cheltenham Festival, prompting significant questioning of the ethics of horse racing. After that event, Animal Aid launched a website www.horsedeathwatch.com, documenting deaths at racetracks with details of the racecourse at the time of the race and the cause of death.

Reading the most recent page is grim: 'Clipped heels and fell – fatally injured. Fell – dead. Fell – broke neck – dead. Broke fetlock – destroyed. Fell – injured – destroyed. Fatally injured while running loose. Injured foreleg – destroyed. Fell – broke neck – dead.'

If the horses were euthanased painlessly, you might argue that death is not a welfare issue. But does the list suggest that? Some might argue, no.

Sadly the horses listed on the website are just the tip of the iceberg, since injuries in training are not included. Nor are the gastric ulcers occurring in these animals that are kept inside on a primarily concentrate diet, despite them evolving to be outside, grass-grazing animals.

It might be argued that horses are designed to run fast and that they have a natural urge to do just that. Following this line of argument, horse racing becomes a testament to the animals' sporting ability and courage. It might be argued that it's only the horses that want to run that reach the racecourse and win, but you might also quite reasonably observe that the horses have little choice – they are bred, trained and fed to run – and if they are keen to race why the need to use the whip?

High levels of cortisol circulating at the peak of a race and the endorphins released during such exertion might suggest racing is a stressful activity, although human athletes show equally elevated levels of these stress hormones without negative psychological impact. However, cortisol and beta endorphin levels have been shown to be elevated in horses being loaded and transported, as well as in those housed with unfamiliar animals. While racehorses may only be exposed to these conditions for a relatively small proportion of their lives is it not worth considering the welfare implications of individual housing on these animals that are much more attuned to being in a group?

High-performance horses are traditionally fed diets high in fermentable carbohydrates – nothing like their



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normal diet and replete in roughage. The infrequent feeding of rapidly consumed high-energy feed can lead to behavioural abnormalities, with stereotypies such as pawing, door kicking or weaving before an anticipated meal, and redirected feeding behaviours such as crib biting and wood chewing in the intervals between meals. Granted, these stereotypies are seen in many other stabled horses just as much as in those used for racing, but this should not

be a reason to ignore them in racehorses.

So given these harsh life challenges, how long can we expect a thoroughbred racehorse to live? We are back to where this opinion piece began. More than half of all two-, three- and four-year-old racehorses become lame and 20 per cent eventually sustain a career-ending injury. Perhaps these animals are put out to graze for their retirement but, sadly, I fear that is not the case for many.

I am pleased that the racing industry is well aware of these welfare issues and is working towards dealing with them. Retraining of Racehorses is a racing charity seeking to do just that for horses in retirement.

Also, after considerable concern over use of the whip, a British Horses Racing Authority (BHA) review in 2011 recommended it be used less and the design of whips be refined to ameliorate negative impacts its use might have. 'Encouraging' the horse is one word to describe its use but others would suggest that hitting an animal for whatever reason is not acceptable.

In February this year, the Horse Welfare Board, an independently chaired body within the BHA, also published a strategic plan. 'A life well lived' recommends that we measure racehorses' quality of life and wellbeing, use data to prevent injury and manage their safety (over their lifetime) and trace every horse from birth to death, however that may be.

Getting more data is all well and good, but the information we already have, as detailed above, is surely enough to tell us we need to act now to reduce the injuries and deaths suffered by these magnificent animals. ●