

RSPCA Knowledgebase

What are the animal welfare issues with Thoroughbred horse racing?

This article provides a summary of the key problems associated with the horse racing industry that need to be resolved in order to protect the welfare of racehorses. For further information on these topics please follow the links at the end of the article.

1. Oversupply of racehorses

To increase the chances of finding the winning champion, the racing industry depends on breeding a high number of horses and a high turn-over rate. Horses may leave the racing industry at any stage of their life, as foals, during training, during their racing career or when they retire. When horses leave racing prematurely, this is often described as 'wastage'. The fate of thousands of horses leaving the industry every year raises serious concerns for their welfare.

The majority of racehorses have a short racing career (only 2-3 years), despite the fact that these horses were bred specifically for this purpose. Horses may be rejected from the racing industry due to poor performance, illness, injury and behavioural problems. A proportion of healthy retired racehorses will become breeding, recreational or equestrian sport horses, while others will be sent to knackeries or abattoirs to be slaughtered. The exact destination of horses leaving the racing industry is unknown as accurate information is not available.

The RSPCA advocates for the racing industry to adopt responsible breeding practices including reducing the number of racehorses bred, minimising the risk of injury and for every horse to be provided with a suitable alternative role on retirement, including provisions being made to ensure their welfare. We also support the mandatory collection and publication of comprehensive life cycle and injury statistics and the development of a national identification and traceability system for racehorses. In this way accurate information will be available on the experience of every racehorse from birth to death.

2. Use of painful devices

The RSPCA is opposed to the use of whips due to their potential to inflict pain and injury and believes that the use of whips cannot be justified given that performance is influenced more by genetics, preparation and rider skill. We are seeking reform of the whip rules and an end to the use of the whip as a performance aid altogether.

Two other types of equipment used on racehorses, which the RSPCA opposes due to the discomfort and pain they can inflict, are tongue ties and spurs. Spurs, which are made of metal and are attached to the back of riding boots, exert sharp pressure when the jockey squeezes or kicks the horse in the flank area. A tongue tie is a piece of nylon or elastic that is wrapped tightly around the tongue and tied to the lower jaw to keep the tongue in place during a race. Restricting the movement of the tongue in this way causes discomfort and can lead to permanent injury. Spurs, which are made of metal and are attached to the back of riding boots, exert sharp pressure when the jockey squeezes or kicks the horse in the flank area.

Despite their adverse impacts, the use of whips, tongue-ties and spurs is officially endorsed by racing authorities. One specific type of equipment which has been outlawed is an electric shock device known as a jigger. A jigger is a battery-powered device which delivers an electric shock when applied to the horse's skin, causing significant pain and long-term distress when associated with other cues. Possession or use of a jigger is a breach of the rules of racing and is an act of cruelty under animal welfare legislation. Despite their clear illegality, some trainers and jockeys still choose to use these devices to coerce horses in a desperate attempt to win races.

3. Risk of injury and death

Racehorses are at risk of harm during races, training and trials with the main types of injuries involving muscle, bones, tendons and ligaments. Serious injuries such as fractures and ruptured ligaments or tendons which cause pain or distress, and cannot be treated should result in immediate euthanasia. Racehorses may also die suddenly during or after a race, which may be due to heart failure or other causes such as the condition known as Exercise Induced Pulmonary Haemorrhage (EIPH), where bleeding into the lungs occurs. This has been related to over-exertion where horses may be pushed too hard to win.

Non-fatal injuries in training, trials or racing do not require immediate euthanasia on humane grounds, and may involve repairable fractures or ligament/tendon damage. However, considerable pain can be experienced in relation to the acute injury as evidenced by lameness, as well as possible pain endured during the healing process and/or treatment regime. A recent study of Australian racing thoroughbreds found a very high prevalence of bone injury and fatigue, especially in older horses with a long history of racing and training [1]. The authors concluded that this evidence suggests that horses require longer rest periods than what is currently practised in the racing industry, to allow bone healing and recovery.

The industry does not provide collated statistics on injuries and fate of racehorses, so a true figure of overall injuries is not available. The RSPCA supports the mandatory collection and publication of comprehensive life cycle and injury statistics for all racehorses.

4. Administration of banned substances (doping)

Despite being illegal, 'doping' of horses has been undertaken by some trainers and/or owners as a way to enhance performance. Random testing of horses is done by racing stewards with significant penalties for breaches but this still does not deter some trainers.

Banned or unregistered substances includes unregistered veterinary chemical products, restricted prescription medicines (whether veterinary or human medicines) that have not been properly supplied and labelled, or any other substances or products used illegally.

Some drugs may mask pain and therefore remove an important protective mechanism to prevent further injury, whilst others may cause unexpected adverse side effects. For example, a study identified significant risks with the misuse of cobalt in racehorses, including thickening of the blood, and heart and nerve problems. Several cases of illegal cobalt use in the Australian racing industry have been reported over recent years.

The racing industry must undertake more vigorous testing and impose harsher penalties to deter 'doping'.

5. Racing immature horses

Horses commence training as one-year-olds in preparation to compete in two-year-old races. Research has shown that shin soreness is a common cause of lameness in two-year-old racehorses and that fast track work greatly increases the risk of injury. Other studies have shown that low level training of young horses may help condition immature bones to reduce the risk of injury. However, training methods are not prescribed and so trainers can impose programs that may be too rigorous for some young horses.

RSPCA Australia is opposed to the racing of immature horses (e.g. two-year-old races) and advocates that before training commences that an independent veterinary assessment is done to verify that the horse has matured satisfactorily.

6. Jumps racing

Jumps racing involves horses racing at speed, over long distances (at least 2.8 km) over numerous obstacles. There are two types of jumps racing – hurdles and steeplechase races, with the latter generally being over longer distances than hurdles and involving higher obstacles. Victoria and South Australia are the only two States which permit jumps racing. Since 2009, at least 49 horses have died as a result of participating in jumps racing. The true toll is believed to be higher as industry statistics on deaths occurring in training and trials are not publicly available. Despite attempts by the industry to improve safety, injury and deaths continue. Jumps racing was banned in New South Wales in 1997 and the RSPCA strongly supports a ban in Victoria and South Australia.

7. Lack of enforceable standards

There are no mandatory welfare standards for racehorses. Therefore, legal protection is limited to the minimal requirements under State based animal welfare legislation. Other areas, where animals are used such as farming and animal research, have specified welfare standards which must be adhered to. The RSPCA believes that the implementation of legal welfare standards for racehorses, to eliminate practices that cause injury, pain, suffering or distress, is an urgent government priority.

8. Inadequate regulation

The horse racing industry largely governs itself in terms of animal welfare through state based racing authorities. Self-regulation, particularly in the absence of appropriate standards, raises concerns regarding adequacy of monitoring and enforcement. Unfortunately, without independent inspections, significant welfare issues can continue undetected. In addition, incentives such as increasing prize money for two-year-old races can encourage more rigorous training of immature horses, thus potentially leading to more injuries. The RSPCA advocates the comprehensive regulation of all horse racing by an independent body with a formal and complete separation between the integrity and regulatory functions from the commercial functions.

9. Lack of industry transparency

It is essential that the racing industry collate and publish relevant data that affect the welfare of horses. Too little is known about the true nature and extent of injuries and deaths of horses which in turn affects the 'wastage' rate and fate of racehorses. Until such data are available, the industry is not motivated or compelled to take action to improve welfare in these specific areas.

Reference

[1] Bani Hassan E, Mirams M, Mackie EJ, Whitton RC (2017) Prevalance of subchondral bone pathological changes in the metacarpi/metatarsi of racing Thoroughbred horses. Australian Veterinary Journal 95: 362-369.

Also Read

-  [What are the animal welfare issues associated with horse jumps racing?](#)
-  [What happens to horses that leave the racing industry?](#)
-  [What is the RSPCA's view on racing two-year-old horses?](#)
-  [What is the RSPCA's view on the use of tongue ties in horse racing?](#)
-  [What is the RSPCA's view on whips in Thoroughbred racing?](#)

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