

# RSPCA Knowledgebase

## What happens to horses that leave the racing industry?

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 The primary reason for horses being withdrawn from racing is poor performance, with other reasons including illness, injury or behavioural problems.

The majority of racehorses will have a racing career of only 2-3 years yet their life expectancy is 25-30 years. Whatever the reason or age at which it occurs, all racehorses will eventually cease racing. There is a high level of public expectation that these horses will be appropriately cared for in their post-racing life, not least because they have been bred and used for sport and profit in a multi-billion dollar industry.

Around 13,000 Thoroughbred foals are born every year in Australia [1]. There has been a gradual reduction in foal births in the past decade, from an annual peak of over 18,000 in the period 1995-2005. At least 2,000 of these foals will never be registered for racing and only around 2,500 will eventually go into breeding, which means around 8,500 adult Thoroughbreds will exit the Thoroughbred racing industry every year. The number of Standardbred (harness racing) foals born has also fallen from over 10,000 in the late 1980s to below 4,000 in 2016. Approximately 1,000 of these foals will never register for racing, 600 will go into breeding and 2,400 adult Standardbreds will exit harness racing each year [2].

We do not know exactly what happens to these horses as there is currently no accurate or transparent lifetime traceability system for racehorses. However, a number of surveys have been conducted in recent years in an attempt to determine their fate: these have reported a range of sometimes contradictory outcomes.

A survey of Thoroughbred and Standardbred trainers in the 2002-03 racing year, funded by the RSPCA, found that the main reason for Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds leaving racing was poor performance (36%, 35%) followed by illness or injury (31%, 27%), breeding (9%, 10%) and unsuitable temperament (6%, 6%) [3]. For Thoroughbred horses exiting racing completely, 19% were rehomed to other equestrian pursuits, 18% for breeding, and 6% were sent for slaughter. For Standardbreds, 9% were rehomed, 16% went to breeding, and 17% were sent for slaughter.

A 2013 survey of trainers funded by the Australian Racing Board is [reported](#) to have found that 45% of relinquished Thoroughbreds were used for breeding, 31% had been rehomed for other purposes, 14% were returned to their owner, 7% had died, and less than 1% had gone to an abattoir. Unfortunately the full details of this study have never been published.

A 2014 study, funded by Racing Victoria, tracking the fate of foals born in Victoria in 2005, was able to contact and survey owners for 54% of the 4,115 foals born in that year [4]. Nine years on, 40% of these foals were reported as rehomed, 20% as breeding, 19% as dead, 5% still racing and the fate of 16% was unknown. None of these horses were reported as having been sold directly for slaughter.

Survey results like these are likely to underestimate the number of horses that are sent for slaughter for three reasons. Firstly, trainers may not wish to admit they have sent horses for slaughter; second, such studies may exclude horses sold interstate to saleyards; and third, they do not take into account those horses that left racing for other reasons but were subsequently sold for slaughter.

A 2008 study of 340 horses entering one of the two export abattoirs which slaughter equines in Australia found that 40% were identifiable as Thoroughbreds and 13% as Standardbreds [5]. Horses were physically examined for brands to determine their origin and age: 60% were less than 8 years old. Around 9,000 horses are currently slaughtered in abattoirs each year and this study suggests that around half of these may be ex-racehorses.

The thought of a racehorse ending their life in an abattoir is not something most Australians feel comfortable with. However, in some circumstances it may be a more humane outcome than being neglected for many years in a paddock. Neglect is a significant welfare problem across all breeds and types of horses in Australia.

**The RSPCA believes that the racing industry needs to do more 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 with provisions being made to ensure their long-term 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.**

## References

[1] [Racing Australia Fact Book 2016-17](#). (accessed on Oct 8 2019)




[2] [Harness Racing Australia Annual Online Statistics](#). (accessed on Oct 8 2019)

[3] Thomson P Hayek A Jones B Evans D and McGreevy P (2014) Number causes and destinations of horses leaving the Australian Thoroughbred and Standardbred racing industries. *Australian Veterinary Journal* 92:303–311 doi:10.1111/avj.12204

[4] Flash ML (2015). [Epidemiology of thoroughbred racehorses entering and leaving the Victorian racing industry](#). A report prepared for Racing Victoria. (accessed on Oct 8 2019)

[5] Doughty A (2008) [An epidemiological survey of the dentition and foot condition of slaughtered horses in Australia](#). Report for the Master of Animal Studies University of Queensland.

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