

Anatomy of a Headline

By Dave Astar (April 9, 2021)

I recently read headlines associated with the North American Thoroughbred racing industry. The 2020 Equine Industry Database (EID) reflected a decline in the fatality rate from 2019 and headlines included comments like, “2020 Fatality Rate Lowest in History, or Lowest Since Record Keeping Began”. Based upon my research, and other stories over recent weeks, these headlines seemed out of place.

Other headlines in the last 30 days included “13 Counts of Cruelty Against a Kentucky Boarding Operation”, “Owner Put on No Entry List after Horse Found in Kill Pen”, “Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation Opens”, “Can Racing Survive Bad People?”, “Daily Wagering Sees Decline in March”, “Pennsylvania Breeders Address Slaughter Pipeline Issues”, “Churchill Shortsighted for Selling Arlington”, “Horse Racing Integrity and Safety Act Polarizing”.

Over the years I have found many racing headlines, like the EID headline, simply create the illusion of progress in a steeply declining industry. In fact, a related quote indicated that authorities were “thrilled to see improvement”, and commended racetracks and regulatory authorities for such improvement. After reviewing the entire body of racing industry work, I concluded that a “thrilled” reaction to a recent data point is the equivalent of being thrilled that people do not drown as fast in eight feet of water as they do in 15!

I spent a lifetime learning that apparent facts are often misleading, and sometimes false, because “comparative context” is not understood. It doesn’t matter if you are reading the bible, studying Covid infection rates or looking at racing fatalities, context matters. Old curmudgeonly quality guys like me always ask for operational definitions before arriving at truth. In the EID instance here are just a few questions:

What is the fatality rate?

How do you define fatality rate?

What is meant by the lowest?

What and whose history are you referring to?

What and whose record keeping?

How do you define record keeping?

The answers to these questions allowed me to discover much more than sound bite headlines, and even come to the conclusion that delusion in racing will always remain a barrier to substantive progress. Let me explain.

The 2020 EID fatality rate may reflect a lower ratio of North American fatalities than was realized in prior EID years but racetrack equine deaths, such as training deaths, stall deaths or any death outside of a 72-hour racing timeframe, are not counted. Of course, any quality analyst would also want to understand the reporting and auditing process related to any data set. Not surprisingly, the data is “self-reported” by racetrack, has never been independently audited for accuracy, and some racetracks refuse to report their data.

Looking deeper, data indicates for example that approximately one third of horses die due to racetrack training, not racing, related incidents. The EID data not only ignores therefore hundreds of racetrack related death incidents but also horse deaths at hundreds of training centers across the country, those horses deemed too slow to race that are not repurposed to go on to other equine disciplines, or the many horses that are not placed in racehorse retirement organizations.

In this quality analyst’s mind, this is a biased and mediocre reporting mechanism, consolidated and reported by the same industry that has every reason possible for presenting the most positive image and improvement trajectory possible.

You see, the unfortunate truth is that horse meat is on the menu in China, Japan, “Mexico”, Belgium, “Canada”, Chile, Spain, Iceland, France, Russia, Kazakhstan, and many Eastern European, South American, Southeast, and Eastern Asian countries. In late 2019 the USA Today, Louisville’s Courier Journal, and other media reported, “an estimated 7,500 to 10,000 thoroughbreds a year are slaughtered for human consumption, according to Alex Waldrop, president of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA)”.

Horse slaughter was stopped in the United States because the USDA refused to certify horse meat for human consumption, but that didn’t stop the kill

trucks and kill pens from coordinating transport of soon to be slaughtered horses to other countries. Think about it. A 7,500 annual Thoroughbred slaughter transportation number was publicly offered up a little over a year ago, by the current Chief Executive Officer of the NTRA? If he doesn't know about racing's dirty little secrets who does?

The USDA tracks all exports, including horses for food consumption. It's estimated that all horse breed exports will remain in the 50,000 to 60,000 range. After decades of not supporting a ban on transporting horses in the United States for slaughter, the NTRA finally came out in support of banning such transportation. A federal bill introduced in January of this year (2021), the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (H.R.503), would prohibit the transport and slaughter of horses in the U.S. for human consumption. It's been passed by the House, but not yet by the Senate.

The SAFE Act, named for the former director of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, is legislation that would permanently end the slaughter of American horses for human consumption in the United States and abroad. It amends Title 18 of the U. S. Code by making it illegal to "possess, ship, transport, purchase, sell, deliver, or receive ... any horse with the intent that it is to be slaughtered for human consumption," with penalties that include fines and imprisonment.

You see, not all that long ago when equine slaughter still took place in the United States, kill trucks used to roam around racetracks. Once upon a time I knew of horses being loaded on such trucks. Then the USDA stopped inspecting horses for human consumption which forced equine slaughter houses to close in America, but horses could still be exported to other countries. Today, Thoroughbreds are still being sold at livestock auctions in many states and then being shipped to kill pens before being exported elsewhere. Our neighbors in Mexico and Canada still operate equine slaughterhouses.

20,000 Thoroughbreds are born in North America annually, predominantly for racing purposes. That number was 40,000 just 30 years ago, and you should also know that horses live 20 to 25 years on average. The sport for which these horses are bred only counts some portion of racetrack deaths as previously mentioned so if you do the math and believe the CEO of the NTRA, racing only counts between 5 to 10% of Thoroughbred deaths annually.

Oh, and here's a little more context. The 2020 EID fatality ratio is literally far from the lowest fatality rate in history, or since record keeping began. In fact, the 2020 rate is higher than recorded fatality rates in other countries. Back in late 2019, Bloodhorse gathered detailed data and concluded, that the U.S. rates of equine racing deaths at that time were much higher than Great Britain's and Japan's, and as much as 3 times higher than Hong Kong's rate.

We also noticed something else that has existed for sometime within the confines of the EID itself. North American racing has done little to nothing to address an obvious predilection to run their races over much more dangerous dirt surfaces! Yep, you heard that right, dangerous "dirt" surfaces!

For 12 years now, the North American fatality data has clearly indicated that horses "will die" 62% more often on dirt racing surfaces than they will on synthetic surfaces! In fact, the surface statistical bias is so significant that never once, "yes never once", has North American dirt racing reflected a lower annual fatality rate than synthetic racing over the 12-year existence of the EID report! You do not have to be trained in statistical process control to understand the credible significance of this fatality bias. In other words, it is a known statistical fact that synthetic racing is not just safer, but much safer, that dirt racing in North America.

With this said, guess what North American racing has done to race their horses more safely? In 2009, the first year of the EID, 14.4% of all races were run on synthetic surfaces. In 2020, only 8.2% of all races were run on safer synthetic surfaces. Yep, with mounds of data, 12 years later, we have almost cut in half the percentage of races we run on the safest known race surfaces!

The excuses for not installing synthetic surfaces begin with old theories associated with the "early synthetics" that did not work as desired so many horsemen demanded that racetracks that installed synthetic surfaces go back to dirt. The excuses end today with delusional racing executives who choose to believe anecdotes, instead of systemic studies, because the cost of transitioning to synthetic surfaces will cut into their profit margins!

North American dirt racing is also supported by horse people who do not want to change existing training or breeding paradigms in North America. If, for example, you breed and race dirt winners today, why would you want to change? The truth is that current contemporary synthetics like Tapeta will

dramatically save equine lives but we continue to run on a 63% more deadly surface with 7 out of every 10 races on dirt!

After reading all of this information you probably think I am a lifelong PETA member. I am not. I have bookcases full of trophies and win pictures as both a Thoroughbred owner and breeder. Yep, you likely think I am a hypocrite, and to some degree you are correct. However, I tried to do things the responsible way.

My wife and I bought farms and have been caring for horses, aka shoveling manure, from the time we first got into racing. When our horses can no longer race, they are placed privately to go on to other disciplines, go to retirement organizations, or come back to the farm to live out their lives with us. In other words, once they can no longer earn their keep by collecting purses on a racetrack, we invest our time and money to continue to take care of them if, and until, someone else wants to do so.

Today, there are many people in racing who do the same thing we do. There are also wonderful Thoroughbred retirement organizations that make sure many former racehorses are well cared for throughout their lifetime. I applaud them but, I know the industry numbers just don't add up. Racehorse retirement organizations cannot come close to handling "all" of the Thoroughbreds who "magically" disappear from racetracks, training facilities, and breeding farms every year and now you may realize where the 7,500 to 10,000 transportation slaughter number came from.

Because I have been involved in racing, I know many racing industry executives treat every minor baby step it was a moon landing. In other words, minor progress is blown out of proportion in an often-veiled effort to pacify the public related to progress. In 2011, Jockey Club Chief Operating Officer James Gagliano said, "We now have in our possession a comprehensive and clearly defined strategy for growth." The overall inflation adjusted pari-mutuels "declined" 11.3% from 2011 to pre-Covid impacted 2019!

Low consumer confidence in the sport, coupled with a stagnant product offering, has produced a divided non-progressive industry. In 1991 there were 79,303 races in North America. In 2019 pre-Covid, there were 40,798 races. That means that in less than 30 years, the sport of Thoroughbred racing has been cut in half!

Yep, today racing is literally half of what it once was because fans abandoned the sport, and the stagnant industry refused to innovate on multiple fronts including safety and integrity. North American racing still has not developed system wide regulations, enforcement, fines, drug policies, safety protocols, quality reporting mechanisms, monitoring efforts, audit procedures, track maintenance procedures, and the list goes on and on as horsemen's organizations fight tooth and nail to stop things like "the enacted" Federal Horse Racing Safety and Integrity Act. The National HBPA has filed a lawsuit against the act, while the NTRA supports it. Talk about infighting!

Though I took care of my horses over the years, I regret being part of a system that I know continues to cause pain and suffering to innocent animals. While there are many in our industry who publicly agree with my position, and publicly support real reform, there are still hundreds of uncaring, "churn and burn", horse people in the business today. These hypocrites conveniently deny the truth, and I disdain those who jump up on podiums to claim they are great humanitarians by donating minor sums to charitable groups or racehorse retirement organizations, knowing full well that those donations rarely represent even a few years' worth of care for "one" retired racehorse.

So, that's my truth. A lack of real progress, coupled with continuing delusion by racing powers who think miniscule improvement helps when mountains should have been moved long ago, create dismal clarity in my mind. My truth may not be the same as yours but it's going to take "real systemic reform" for me, or contemporary fans, to ever be "thrilled" with our racing industry.

Full implementation of the HISA act, and the SAFE act, is a start. Lifetime monitoring of every born Thoroughbred, with reform in the financial model which makes owners and most importantly racetracks responsible for funding the lifetime care of all Thoroughbreds, is the end. If owners and racetracks cannot financially handle lifetime Thoroughbred welfare they should not be allowed to profit from horses. Racetracks are the biggest culprit and regulatory groups that grant licenses while ignoring the industry truths are complicit! Racetracks must present a model which extracts adequate lifetime welfare funds for every racing start made by every horse at the racetracks they run at. Let me offer a simple example.

Based on current data, I estimate the average horse will run 23 times in their lifetime, during a 3-to-4-year career, and retire at age 5 or 6. That leaves near

15 to 20 years of retirement life. At the very “low end”, feed, care, vet bills and other expenses on good year-round pastures will cost \$1,500 per year, or at least \$22,500 during the retirement years of a racehorse. If half of the former racehorses are placed with new owners, the other half should be funded for their lifetime. That would mean owners and racetracks would need to come up with approximately \$500 per race to cover the average retirement lifetime. Let that sink in for a minute, and remember those funds do not cover all the horses that washout to begin with and never race!

Yep, I believe that those that profit from the life of a Thoroughbred should provide for the life of a Thoroughbred, not just the racing life, and now here’s the reality. I just got a statement from a racetrack. Guess how much they charge me for Thoroughbred racehorse “aftercare”? A measly \$5 per race. That amount is laughable, unless racetracks are covering the other \$495, which I know they are not!

In closing, after analyzing all the data and putting things in context, improving a partially measured unaudited sub-select metric will never be something to applaud unless you really want applause to mask truth when so much more should, and could, be done.

Eight feet of water my friends, nothing more.

Direct Links to data:

<https://www.britishhorseracing.com/regulation/making-horseracing-safer/>

http://jockeyclub.com/pdfs/eid_12_year_tables.pdf

<http://www.jockeyclub.com/default.asp?section=FB&area=10>

<https://www.bloodhorse.com/horse-racing/articles/237024/comparing-equine-injury-rates-suggests-u-s-can-improve>

<https://horseracingwrongs.org/killed-2020/>

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/horseracing/2019/10/31/breeders-cup-horses-go-racetracks-slaughterhouses/2485345001/>

<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/horses/horse-racing/2019/06/15/horse-racing-threatened-slaughter-industry-says/1459062001/>

<https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2020/01/bill-permanently-banning-horse-slaughter-and-limiting-exports-gets-hearing/>

<https://www.ntra.com/ntra-statement-on-the-horseracing-integrity-and-safety-act/>

