

How Long Before We Bet On Which Horse Will Be Euthanized?

Coteau, LA – Saturday May 3rd, 2008 may not just be a day we remember as the day the life of a filly named Eight Belles came to an end. This first Saturday in May could be the day we remember as an outcry against the “Sport of Kings” beginning.

Eight Belles finished second in front of a packed crowd at the Churchill Downs on the day of the Kentucky Derby. Seconds later, the horse collapsed. As the crowd still cheered for the winner, the runner-up was quietly euthanized. Eight Belles was 3-years-old.

“That’s the problem,” says Tricia Psarreas, co-author of ‘Freedom’s Rein.’ She says the horses are pushed too hard, too young.

Much press has been dedicated to the question of whether Eight Belles needed to be killed. Veterinarians have made the cable T.V. rounds telling the American public euthanizing a horse with broken ankles is the kind thing to do. A horse’s chance of recovery from a significant injury beneath the knee is slim. The recovery, experts tell reporters, is crueler than ending the suffering.

Much less press has been given to the question of why these horses are being injured on the track.

It was rare to see a horse euthanized publicly before the mid 70’s. Now, we know names like Barbaro, injured in the 2006 Preakness and put down a year later. Horses like Prairie Bayou, winner of the 1993 Preakness, euthanized on the track at the Belmont stakes. On the same 1993 Preakness track was Union City. The difference is Union City didn’t leave the track. That horse was euthanized after breaking down during the race. Three years before, 3 horses were victims of the Breeder’s cup: Mr. Nickerson, Shaker Knit and Go for Wand.

Psarreas points out the last Triple Crown winner was in 1978. She says horses now, 3 decades later, don’t have the stamina to win three large races. She blames the almighty dollar for pushing some owners to push their horses too far.

The second to last Triple Crown winner, Jean Cruguet, who rode to victory in 1977 is quoted as saying, “[People] go for the money and for the rush. Before, with horses like Seattle Slew, horses were made to win a lot of races. Now, horses are running longer races before they are ready. To me that’s a joke. They put so much wear and tear on the horses. They work the horse and the horses are done. Before, horses used to get tender loving care. Now, there’s no tender loving care.”

Horses, says Psarreas, are pushed to their limits too young. Before a colts’ bones are fully formed – they are forced to race. She says it creates brittle bones, creating a death waiting to happen.

“No one wants these horses to get hurt,” says former Kentucky Derby jockey Shane Sellers. “Jockeys, owners and the fans want the horses to be healthy. They want these horses to win. They want these horses to live to go out to stud and breed new horses worth new money. Unfortunately, they want it so badly, they are willing to push a filly so hard training for the win – that they wind up having to end the filly’s life on the track.”

As American equestrian fans look toward the second jewel of the Triple Crown, the May 17th Preakness, the question now isn’t just which horse will win. The question now, is will there be another dead horse on the track to dull the shine of the Triple Crown in the “Sport of Kings?”

About the Author

Shane Sellers started riding horses at the age of 11 and became a professional jockey by the time he was 16. Over the course of his career, Sellers won over 4,000 races and over \$122 million in purses. He was also the leading jockey advocate for issues like low jockey weights, endorsements and on-track insurance. Because of his activism, jockeys are now allowed to ride with endorsements, weight maximums have gone up a few pounds and the on-track insurance policy has increased from \$100,000 to \$1,000,000. Portions of Sellers’ story have also been seen in HBO’s controversial documentary, “Jockey.” He and his wife, Kelli, have three children together: Shali, Saban and Steiner. More information can be found online at www.FreedomsRein.com.

Tricia Psarreas is a well respected ghost writer and co-author of a number of non-fiction and fiction books. Her latest is “Freedom’s Rein.”