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A Blood Sport For The Rich and Famous?

A new report finds horse racing carnage is getting worse.

Posted March 25, 2012

As I discussed in my last Animals and Us post ([here](#)), HBO recently cancelled its critically acclaimed series "Luck" following the deaths of three horses on the set. In that post, I used statistics compiled by Jeffrey McMurray, an Associated Press reporter on the number of horses that died in racing related "incidents" between 2003 and 2008.

McMurray's investigation was triggered by the death of Eight Belles during the 2008 Kentucky Derby. Last week my friend Beth Daly, a University of Windsor anthrozoologist and horse buff, emailed me and said that the racing world was abuzz with rumors of an upcoming New York Times expose of horse racing in America. The report, which was based on an exhaustive analysis of 150,000 races between 2009 and 2011, appeared Sunday, March 25.

Have things gotten better since the death of Eight Belles? No. They have gotten worse.

With apologies to the Harper Index, the results speak for themselves:

- 24 - the number of horses that die each week at racetracks in the United States.
- 23 - the number of deaths and serious injuries ("incidents") that occurred on May 7, 2011.
- 5.2 - the average number of "incidents" per 1,000 starts.
- 13.9 - the number of "incidents" per 1,000 starts at Ruidoso Downs, New Mexico - the nation's most dangerous race track.
- 7 - the number of horses that fell in a single race at Charles Town Races, West Virginia.

- 1 - the number of horses that finished the Charles Town Races race.
- 3,800 - the number of doping incidents caught in drug tests (no doubt a vast underestimate of the equine drug problem)
- 2,300 - the number of horses that died at state regulated tracks in the past three years.

Where Is the Animal Welfare Act?

The Times attributes the large number of equine deaths to an increase in doping due to financial pressures on race tracks - particularly those associated with casino gambling.

Further, there are vast differences between states in rates of accidents and fatal injuries (New Mexico, California, and Arizona are the worst.)

I know a lot of cockfighters who quit fighting roosters when the animal fighting provisions under the Animal Welfare Act were beefed up and you could get hard time in a federal pen for transporting game chickens across state lines.

Maybe it's time for the feds to take a hard look at "the sport of kings."

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The New York Times article is [here](#). The state comparisons are [here](#). The NYT photo essay is [here](#). And watch [this NYT video](#). (For the toll racing takes on jockeys, see [this video](#).)

Hal Herzog studies human-animal interactions and teaches at Western Carolina University. He is the author of [Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals](#).