Up Front

The Kentucky Derby is the highlight of two days of glamour and glitz, when horse racing puts on its best face for an admiring public via the world's media.

Investigations

"Doing the Derby" in Kentucky
Racing's problems overshadow its big day

For this year's running of the Kentucky Derby in May, David Wills, HSUS vice president, Investigations, and HSUS investigator Stephen Dickstein traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, to observe firsthand the top Thoroughbred race in the United States.

The HSUS has long been opposed to horse racing, in part because of the inherent problems of using horses (or any animals) in competitive events for money and fame.

In 1989 an HSUS fact sheet on horse racing raised the question whether horse racing could ever be humane. Our response was then—and is now:

Ideally, horse racing could be humane if conducted properly. However, as long as horse racing is a business and not a "sport," money will take precedence over the welfare of the horse. Because of the large amounts of money wagered at racetracks and the resulting potential for huge profits, it does not appear likely that pari-mutuel horse racing will ever become a humane sport. Gambling, quick profits, or tax shelters are the main incentives attracting participants to horse racing. Consequently the horse is viewed not as a living, feeling creature but merely as a tool for making money.

The HSUS visited Churchill Downs mainly to express to senior officials our serious objections to drugs in horse racing. The Kentucky Derby allows horses to run with race-day administrations of both Lasix (a furosemide) and "bute" (phenylbutazone). Lasix supposedly controls nosebleeds, but in fact not only controls respiratory bleeding but can also mask the presence of other drugs, such as corticosteroids, in a horse's system. Bute is an anti-inflammatory drug that can mask pain so effectively that a horse will continue to run with an injury that under normal circumstances would cause extreme pain to the animal even at a walk.

Another objective of the visit was to begin talking to some of Kentucky's Thoroughbred industry leaders about not only drugs in horse racing, but also other areas of concern to The HSUS.

A large number of Thoroughbreds end up as pet or human food. Horse meat is considered a staple in parts of Europe, and American dog-food companies have used horse meat and horse by-products for years. While we are concerned about any horse who ends up on a plate or in a can, we are particularly opposed to the slaughter of surplus horses bred for racing then discarded when their racing careers end. Approximately 40,000 registered Thoroughbreds will be born in 1992; only a minute fraction of them will live out their natural lifespan of eighteen to twenty-four years.

Finally, we believe that races for three-year-old horses, such as the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont (the Triple Crown), are too physiologically stressful for such animals. To be "competitive" for a race like the Derby, which is exclusively for three-year-olds, a horse has to begin intensive training as a two-year-old. (This year's Kentucky Derby winner, Lil E. Tee, became a celebrity after Churchill Downs but didn't even finish in the top three two weeks later at the Preakness, a victim of severe respiratory bleeding.)

The Kentucky Derby is horse racing's crown jewel, the most prestigious horse-racing event in the world. Both equine and human winners of the Derby become instant celebrities. To many horse enthusiasts, winning the Derby is the greatest achievement of a horse's or jockey's lifetime.

The Derby attracted more than 211,000 visitors in two days (the Friday before the Derby and Derby day). Perhaps no racetrack or horse-racing event has ever had a larger two-day attendance. The people involved in the Derby are the movers and shakers of the industry—the very people who can reform and clean up...
that industry.

And make no mistake—the racing industry is in abysmal condition. The Derby, the Preakness, the Belmont, and races of the Breeder's Cup represent the flagships of the industry, but perhaps fewer than 1 percent of all Thoroughbreds will ever find themselves competing at that level.

The gap between that 1 percent who are pampered celebrities and the rest is vast. The life of a working-class Thoroughbred is overracing; underresting; ingestion of too many drugs, both legal and illegal; continuously debilitating injuries; followed by breakdowns and, finally, transportation to the nearest slaughterhouse. Few will live out natural lifespans grazing in a field of green.*

Comparing the Kentucky Derby to the rest of horse racing is like comparing the Westminster Kennel Club dog show to a puppy mill. The situation is worsening: as more and more marginal operators get into horse racing, the number of incidents of abuse and misuse of horses rises.

In horse racing a horse is valuable only if he/she runs—and runs faster than the other horses most of the time. Horses must run or die. When the horse is no longer profitable, death soon follows.

*Some horses not permanently lame from injury or traumatized by training do go on after racing careers to lives as show or pleasure horses.

Messrs. Dickstein and Wills met with Thomas Meeker, president of Churchill Downs, and candidly discussed HSUS concerns with horse racing. They made it clear that The HSUS was at the Derby in part to underscore our determination to see horse racing clean up its act.

To that end a report is being prepared that will be sent to Churchill Downs and the Thoroughbred industry, challenging the industry to begin to address seriously the plight of its animals. Clearly a call to remove all drugs from horse racing will be paramount in the HSUS report. If a horse is not healthy enough to be drug free, then that animal is not fit to race.

The HSUS will call on the leaders of the racing industry to either clean up or shut down many of the hellholes that operate as racetracks around the country.

We will also call for enforcement of requirements for extended rest and extensive treatment for racing injuries. In addition the industry must end the unholy economic alliance between track veterinarians who prescribe drugs and the owners and trainers who attempt to compete and win by chemically altering the animals' performances. At the very least, The HSUS believes all Triple Crown races must be run drug free, if for no other reason than as a statement to the rest of the racing community that at the top level the drugging of horses is unacceptable.

Horses are magnificent animals who bring us great joy and exhilaration. No one who saw Secretariat could help but be touched by his competitive fire and his heart. But a few days of pomp and media hype in the spring cannot obscure the sordid and inhumane existence of animals that compete for the rest of the year in an arena where they must run or die. The time has come for the racing industry to begin halting the abuse of the animals who so many in the industry claim to revere.

If the Kentucky Derby is to be truly the greatest horse race in the world, then the standards of care and compassion must be the highest at Churchill Downs. The people associated with the Derby—jockeys, owners, trainers, and the viewing public—have the power to raise the standard of protection and care of these animals to an unparalleled level, where horses are not just a means to an end but are treated as the sentient and special creatures they are.

The HSUS visit to the Derby this year must mark the beginning of such a change.
Mr. Wills later flew along the Iditarod Trail during the race to observe firsthand the effects of the rule changes on the dogs and to prepare a more comprehensive set of recommendations to submit to the ITC.

It was clear that the changes made in the 1992 rules resulted in a dramatic improvement in the dogs' health and well-being. Plenty of straw was available for all the dogs to bed down in, for example.

Based on our observations of the '92 race and other information, The HSUS has asked the ITC for additional specific changes:

1. Establishing a “pro-am” format to ensure that dogs used by less-experienced mushers receive the same attention and oversight as do the “professional” teams.
2. Prohibiting the leasing of teams and individual dogs.
3. Performing thorough prerace veterinary examinations on all participating dogs.
4. Instituting monetary compensation for the Iditarod head veterinarian.
5. Changing “Dodge Dash” into a best-elapsed-time event, rather than operating under the current “first-musher-into-
6. Setting mandatory rest periods of twelve hours for each third of the race.

The HSUS has reservations about many of the peripheral aspects of sled-dog racing, particularly the culling of sled dogs and the deplorable conditions found in many dog yards (see sidebar). Mr. Wills’s report to the ITC concluded: 

The HSUS finds sled-dog racing an unnecessary and potentially dangerous activity for people and animals. However, we acknowledge the current popularity of the sport and therefore feel committed to pursuing the highest level of concern and protection for the animals who must endure these races. It is our hope that the ITC will continue in its commitment to ensure a more humane event. We feel that the implementation of the . . . recommendations will continue to underscore the Iditarod Trail Committee’s sincerity in its assertion that the dogs’ safety is one of the organization’s major concerns. We applaud the progress made to date but hope you realize that our recommendations reflect serious concerns that you have yet to address.

During this year’s Iditarod, Mr. Wills spoke of The HSUS’s concerns to a nationwide audience on ABC-TV’s “Wide World of Sports.” The May/June 1992 issue of Mushing magazine carried an in-depth interview, in which he outlined HSUS concerns.

The HSUS remains steadfastly committed to humane care for those animals who are asked to participate in the Iditarod and similar events. Copies of our Iditarod report are available from the HSUS Investigations section.

**Musher Convicted of Sled-Dog Cruelty**

On September 7, 1991, a neighbor of two-time Iditarod musher Frank Winkler heard the cries of three dogs and called Anchorage Animal Control. A box of fourteen bloody sled-dog puppies, all dead but two, was discovered. Mr. Winkler was charged with fourteen misdemeanor counts of cruelty for allegedly bludgeoning the puppies to death.

According to the charging document, one of the puppies was “crying and was cold, clammy, wet, bloody, and showed clinical signs of shock.” The other puppy was half-buried in the pile of dead pups. Both live dogs had crushed skulls and were later destroyed by animal-control officers.

At his trial Mr. Winkler said he shot most of the dogs with a friend’s .22-caliber rifle: “I took them out one by one, held them down to the ground and stuck the gun to their head and pulled the trigger.” He could not shoot six of the unwanted puppies because they were too small, he said, so he decided to strike them on the head with the blunt end of an ax. “I put them on the dog house and I struck them in the head,” he said.

On April 10, 1992, Mr. Winkler was convicted in Anchorage District Court of four animal-cruelty charges. The ITC voted to ban him permanently from the Iditarod, but he may request a hearing in five years to reconsider the decision. On April 16 District Court Judge Martha Beckwith sentenced Mr. Winkler to 160 hours of community-service work and two years’ probation. Mr. Winkler was also ordered not to try personally to destroy any of his dogs during his probation. If he completes the probationary period without further incident, four misdemeanor convictions for animal cruelty will be erased from his record.

The HSUS believes the culling and killing of unwanted surplus dogs is much more widespread than the mushing industry admits and will continue to challenge it as an unacceptable practice.
A terrified dairy cow, too sick and exhausted to stand up, is dragged out of a truck by a chain wrapped around one leg. The sound of ligaments and joints in the leg tearing from the stress caused by her 1,100-pound body can be heard as she unsuccessfully struggles to right herself.

A paralyzed sheep lies on an unloading dock, her eyes blinking. She is dragged into an aisleway and left. Some time later she is trampled by two boars who have escaped from a pen. When an HSUS investigator attempts to protect her from the boars, the sheep is tossed by her legs into the back of a van, and her owner returns to the auction.

A half-dead calf, too weak to stand or walk, is dragged outside by one ear and left by a Dumpster. He will remain there until the next day, without food, water, or veterinary care. The HSUS investigator is told that if the calf is still alive the next day, he will be sent to slaughter.

These instances of cruel handling and neglect witnessed by HSUS investigators and other observers are examples of the treatment endured by many downed animals in livestock markets across the nation. A “downer,” or downed animal, is too weak, sick, or injured to stand or walk unaided. In some cases the suffering of such animals is so severe that the only humane remedy is immediate euthanasia. All too often, however, only the dollar value of an animal’s meat determines how such animals are handled.

Although downed animals amount to only about .1 percent of livestock traded annually, that translates into some 68,000 animals who endure great suffering. Much is unnecessary: according to industry sources, 75–90 percent of downed animals could be prevented by improved management, handling, and transportation practices. Industry experts state that nine out of ten downed cattle arrive at livestock markets in a weak or emaciated state, and most downed animals are ill animals whose condition has deteriorated over time. Downers as a result of true accidents are relatively rare.

Many downed animals are handled and transported excessively and far too many endure abusive handling. Downers on the farm should be slaughtered humanely at home or be sent directly to slaughter; however, too many downed animals are sent instead to intermediate livestock markets. There they are unloaded, left without food and water (sometimes for days), then reloaded onto vehicles that take them to slaughter facilities. They are unloaded yet another time before slaughter. Such treatment is extremely stressful even for healthy stock; for ill animals in a state of collapse, it causes inexcusable suffering.

For decades The HSUS has worked to eliminate farm-animal suffering caused by improper and abusive transportation practices. Since the early 1980s, The HSUS has specifically confronted the problem of downed animals and the extreme suffering such animals often endure during transportation and slaughter. Our investigators have repeatedly visited livestock markets and worked for marketplace reform and for humane standards of farm animal husbandry.

The HSUS became increasingly concerned that the suffering of downed animals was continuing and launched an investigation into the handling of downers at livestock markets. In the fall and winter of 1991/92, five HSUS investigators visited thirty-one livestock markets in seven states, spending from several hours to a full day at each market. What they found was shocking and led them to conclude that not only was industry self-regulation completely ineffective but downers continued on page 36.