



Question
of the month
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CORMAC BREATHNACH, GALWAY BLOODSTOCK

Racing faces an image crisis. Calling horseracing "the sport of kings" has done this industry a great disservice.



It has reinforced the misconception among casual fans that horsemen are all Forbes 500 businessmen with thousands of acres of white-fenced pastures, who race their multi-million dollar horses against their will. Nothing could be further from the truth. In order to save this industry from the wrath of animal welfare groups, we must change this image.

We now have ample television coverage of racing, but the sport is being marketed simply as a means to gamble. Very little is done to draw

the budding enthusiast to the horse itself, and that is the unique element that this sport has to offer--not gambling, which can be done anywhere. Racing offers fans a great day out, and a chance to see elite athletes up close, but instead fans are being lectured about "inside speed bias" or "hitting the all button." If you attract fans to the game first, rest assured most of them will bet. But the majority don't want to bet until they know something about the horses. I have brought many people racing for the first time. None of them ever wanted to be told who to bet on, only to understand how and why to choose a particular horse. This sport is about the horses who embody the very essence of competitive spirit, and the hardworking, passionate and compassionate people that care for them. It should be marketed as such, lest we fall further foul of a misinformed public.

On a related, but separate note, we must do everything possible to minimize the incidence of catastrophic injury to our athletes. Occasional injuries are an inevitable consequence of any high-performance sport (NFL, NASCAR etc.), but horseracing faces the unique difficulty that frequently our patients are not treatable.

Outlined below are three common practices that only we can change to improve this situation:

Firstly, the use of cosmetic surgeries to improve conformation has resulted in the standing of stallions that no longer exhibit their own genetic predispositions. The innate conformational flaws of these individuals are unknowingly being passed on to successive generations. Ideally, these surgeries should be recorded in a database made freely available to breeders so that they can make their own informed mating decisions.

Secondly, allowing horses to perform on race-day medications clouds inherent defects that might otherwise have fished those individuals out of the gene pool. A "quick fix" of adopting another, more conservative racing nation's drug rules, and applying it uniformly to all U.S. racing jurisdictions may be considered drastic, but these are drastic times. Improving a breed on the population level requires selective breeding of the fittest. Determining the fittest individual through medication and surgery can only have negative consequences. While accumulation of these defects cannot happen overnight, we are already advancing down this path, and must change direction before the situation deteriorates further.

Thirdly, for many breeders the goal of breeding has changed significantly. Ours has become a "breed-to-sell" industry, where the auction ring is the new winner's circle. This has led to the overbreeding of young, unproven stallions, many of which will ultimately fail as sires of good racehorses. And clearly there is little or no correlation between high-priced yearlings and superior racetrack performance, further undermining this practice. Economics dictate that there is no easy way to revert to an old-fashioned breed-to-race philosophy. But maybe we could all at least take a long, careful look at our stallion selections and score an extra point for "retired sound."

What are some positive steps racing should take in the wake of the Eight Belles tragedy, both for the safety of the horses and in light of the mounting public criticism of the sport??

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