Responsible Horse Ownership and Racing Reform

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1. Introduction

Man’s relationship with the horse dates back to antiquity. The nature of that relationship has evolved through the ages. As a beast of burden, the horse initially provided man with transportation, clothing, and food in many societies. In America, horses have become a romantic icon of the American West. In our current American culture, we have formed an emotional bond with horses that is unique in the animal kingdom. Our society has distanced itself from its agrarian roots, and the general public view of the horse has changed from livestock to companion animal. This shift in attitude has far-reaching implications for the horse and those who work with them on a daily basis.

In ancient times, the philosopher Aristotle advocated a balance in life between logos (logic), ethos (ethics), and pathos (emotion). He believed that, to live a good life, these three aspects of thought need to be in balance. It can be argued that man’s modern relationship with the horse is defined largely by pathos. There is no denying the emotional benefits from our relationship with the horse, yet these rewards come with a responsibility to embrace the ethical and logical aspects of horse ownership as well.

On an individual level, responsible horse ownership means giving thought to how our life decisions affect the health and welfare of our horses. Their well-being must be a priority, and we need to recognize that this stewardship represents significant time and financial commitment. Horses live a long time. They show signs of age in their late teens, but most horses live into their 20s or 30s. With good care and a little luck, horses can live into their 40s.

Responsible horse ownership must first address the basic needs of the horse, including food, shelter, and health care. Nutritional requirements are influenced by the size of the horse, the environment, the age, the type of activity, and unique metabolic needs. Horses must be provided with regular feed and adequate access to clean, fresh water at all times. Because the horse is a grazing animal, the basis for all horse diets should be hay or pasture. Grain should be used as necessary to supplement forage. Shelter may be natural or constructed to provide for sunshade and windbreak. It should be of adequate size to avoid injury, be adequately ventilated and free of hazards, and have good footing that is well drained. The horse must have an opportunity for daily exercise.

Health care issues include routine hoof and dental care, regular vaccinations, deworming, and veterinary treatment as needed. Horses should be observed at least once per day and more frequently.
in high-risk periods such as seasonal changes, when new animals are introduced, or at foaling time. Good veterinary and dental care, good nutrition, and regular exercise are the keys to a long and healthy life. If breeding is part of the program, additional considerations are involved. Although the experience of birth and raising a foal are unique and wonderful, breeding horses brings unique responsibilities. There are numerous costs associated with breeding, including stud fees and proper medical care for the mare and foal. Horse owners must examine why they want to breed and consider what happens to the offspring if they are unable to sell it.

Current economic realities place increased pressure on horsemen to make good choices as responsible horse owners. To do so, horse owners must set priorities. What are the most important needs of the horse? It is helpful to list the stable costs from the past year. Can feed costs be reduced by feeding a high-quality forage with reduced grain intake or can they make better use of pasture? Can travel expenses be reduced? Can routine farrier and veterinary care be budgeted? As a conscientious consumer: “Is it nice or is it necessary?” It is important to emphasize that a healthy horse is an economical horse!

The easiest way to reduce costs, of course, is to reduce the number of horses that you own. However, in the current oversupply market, it has becomes extremely difficult to sell or even give horses away. The key is usability. The most marketable horse is one that is safe and easy to ride. Ultimately, we all must make appropriate arrangements for disposition of our horses. As difficult a decision as it may be, humane euthanasia often becomes a part of that plan.

At the organizational level, we must also exercise responsible stewardship and use a balanced philosophy when we create policy and advocate to the public. We must consider both the intended and unintended consequences of our decisions and policies. Our actions, however well intentioned, may have far-reaching consequences that may actually compromise the health and welfare of horses. We are obligated to perform a “welfare audit” of our strategic objectives and the outcomes of our actions.

Welfare of the horse is everyone’s concern, and efforts are underway in all segments of the horse industry to address welfare concerns that range from the horse show ring to the racetrack. In all aspects of the horse industry, we must “put the horse first.” This means making good decisions every day to provide for the health and welfare of horses in our care. This means making responsible decisions in the barn and in the board room. This means taking personal responsibility for our actions and being held accountable for the outcome of our decisions. The criteria for all of our initiatives should be as follows: when all is said and done, will the horse be better for it?

Definition and understanding of animal welfare varies among individuals and organizations. None of the following views are inherently right or wrong, and people may hold more than one view at a time. Animal welfare may be defined in terms of (1) the basic health and function of the body (functional view); (2) how an animal “feels,” that is, its physiological state, such as pain, suffering, or contentment (positive effective state view); or (3) an animal’s ability to lead a reasonably “natural” life and perform behaviors in which it might normally engage (natural living view). When the welfare of horses is assessed, their broad athletic, economic, and recreational uses are also considered.

Both science and society have a role to play in deciding what constitutes an appropriate level of animal welfare. Whereas science can determine what type or degree of animal welfare risk exists under specific circumstances, science cannot determine what type of risk is acceptable. That is a question that society decides. In the past, animal rights groups were considered fringe elements of society in the discussion of animal welfare. As these organizations have developed an increased following, their influence on the opinions of general society has increased proportionately. Given the complexity of the issue, who speaks for the horse on issues of welfare and by what ethical entitlement do they do so?

Ethics is the study of moral issues. Normative or “prescriptive” ethics involves the determination of what we ought to do. Descriptive ethics is the study of how people think about behavior being right or wrong. Metaethics is the study of the absolute nature of ethical decisions. The following is an example of the complexity and potential misapplication of ethical statements pertaining to the issue of racing horses.

Argument 1
Animal rights organizations do not believe that racing horses is acceptable.

Argument 2
The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) believes that racing horses is acceptable.

Conclusion
Racing horses is right or wrong depending on the culture of the organizations who speak to this issue.

The error in this argument is that the first two statements are descriptive ethical statements. They describe how people feel about using horses for entertainment. The conclusion is a normative statement that is nonsensical, because the right or wrong about racing horses is independent of the cultural feelings on the subject. A more appropriate conclusion would be the following: the way that people feel about racing horses is influenced by culture of the organizations to which they belong.
There are legitimate animal welfare issues that involve the use of animals for sport or exhibition. It is the position of the AVMA that the use of animals for sport or exhibition is a legitimate and humane activity. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) advocates the humane treatment of all horses and believes that the equine industry and horse owners have a responsibility to provide humane care throughout the life of the horse.

The racing industry in America is in crisis. The general public has turned away from the sport and is upset about the catastrophic injury of horses seen on national television. The wagering public believes that medication has created an unlevel playing field. Many industry stakeholders are making sincere efforts to reform the racing industry to recapture the public interest in what was once considered “the sport of kings.” The AAEP believes that veterinarians, as the medical health care providers, play a unique role in this process to “put the horse first.” In August 2008, the AAEP convened a task force to address racing issues. Later re-organized as the Racing Committee, this group of 26 racetrack practitioners, specialists, and regulatory veterinarians has created three White Papers1 to address specific issues. The AAEP input in this process has helped shape the raceday environment to support welfare of the horse.

The National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA) created the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance in 2008 to address five major areas that were felt to be critical to the safety and integrity concerns of racing fans. Interestingly, all of these concerns focused on veterinary issues: (1) medication and testing, (2) injury reporting and prevention, (3) safety research, (4) creation of a safer racing environment, and (5) aftercare for retired racehorses. AAEP input in this process has helped shape the code of standards of the Safety and Integrity Alliance. Equine welfare remains a high priority. Racing fans want a sport that is safer for the horse and has integrity for the wagering public. The focus of the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance, on creating an infrastructure to establish alternate careers and find homes for retired racehorses, supports the mission of the Unwanted Horse Coalition: to reduce the number of unwanted horses and improve the quality of their life. The medical and leadership roles of veterinarians in this ongoing process is critical, and we are making a positive impact on the attitudes of the racing fan and the general public. A recent survey of general sports fans and racing fans in particular conducted in 2009 indicated that the general public recognizes and supports the efforts of the racing industry to reduce injuries, assure integrity, and provide extended care for the equine athletes.

The Jockey Club and the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation have hosted three Safety and Welfare Summits in the past 4 years. These meetings bring together a wide cross-section of the racing, breeding, and veterinary community to improve the safety and welfare of the Thoroughbred racehorse. During the original summit, committees were formed to address injury reporting, education and licensing, shoeing and hoof care, racing surfaces, durability, race conditions, and health and medical records. In some cases, the recommendations of these committees have been put into practice, and in others, there is ongoing refinement of objectives as changes and improvements are made.

In the most recent summit, objectives were developed in four areas: racing equipment and safety, racetrack environment and training practices, continuing education and licensing, and transitioning Thoroughbreds to second careers. The specific welfare recommendations of the third summit include the following: creation of a track liaison position at each racetrack to coordinate aftercare of retired racehorses, formalization of reciprocity of veterinarians, stewards, and starters lists on a national basis, implementation of advanced safety equipment, development of a comprehensive database of track maintenance, training and veterinary records, creation of veterinary guidelines to assist rescue and retirement organizations in determining appropriate care of retired racehorses based on their physical condition, and establishment of continuing education for trainers, grooms, farriers, and jockeys to improve horsemanship skills. A complete summary of the summit objectives and recommendations are available at the Jockey Club website (http://www.grayson-jockeyclub.org/summitDisplay.asp). Welfare is a process, and these ongoing efforts are meant to ensure that the racing industry remains focused on the continuing and pressing need to make improvements and innovations that will promote safety and welfare of the horse.

Reference