

Just because we can, does it mean we should?

By Ryan Carpenter, DVM, MS, DACVS



Dr. Ryan Carpenter

Occupational-related injuries occur in all athletic sporting events, and the Thoroughbred racehorse is not immune.

Racing's incessant pursuit of safety over the past decade has resulted in a significant reduction in fatalities and improved safety. These considerable improvements, however, may not quell societal concerns, which have the potential to affect our

social license to operate. We live in a world in which every fatal injury is significant and has a tremendous impact on our industry as a whole.

Many fractures that occur in racing are easily repaired. Surgical repair gives these horses an opportunity for a continued racing career or a rewarding second career. In fact, horses with injuries considered career ending not long ago are now going on to have competitive racing and post-racing careers. This change is the direct result of continual surgical advances that improve outcomes.

A practitioner considers many factors when discussing the appropriate treatment plan for a horse following an injury. As veterinarians, we are ethically obligated to consider humane euthanasia as a viable option when evaluating severe injuries. The AAEP has very specific guidelines for when humane euthanasia is indicated, and I would encourage you to review these recently updated guidelines at aaep.org/guidelines/euthanasia-guidelines. One criterion not in the guidelines but which often becomes part of the discussion, even subconsciously on the part of the veterinarian, is the value of the horse. We have all seen clients make treatment choices irrespective of cost. While this is nothing new in the small animal arena, it is becoming more common with horses. Many owners no longer view horses as working animals. As such, their status has been elevated to a level similar to a family pet in today's society.

So I ask: What is our obligation to the injured horse? Does it depend upon the severity of the injury alone or is latent monetary value a factor? For example, what happens when a horse sustains a complete displaced condylar fracture? Most veterinarians would advocate for surgical repair; this relatively simple and straightforward surgery has a high outcome for pasture soundness. Some veterinarians would recommend euthanasia as there is a

poor prognosis for a racing career and the horse inevitably will develop secondary osteoarthritis, ultimately affecting soundness years down the road.

Taken one step further, what if a horse sustains a more severe injury such as a catastrophic fetlock injury with biaxial sesamoid bone fractures? In my experience, financial value often becomes the center of the discussion driven by the trainer, owner and, often, the veterinarian. These types of injuries require a more involved surgical procedure (i.e., fetlock arthrodesis). While a complex procedure, this surgical technique has evolved considerably in recent years, resulting in better outcomes. However, these cases require significant commitment from a surgical and rehabilitation standpoint, and there is a higher rate of postoperative complications compared to a condylar fracture repair.

If this is a highly valuable breeding animal, then the long-term management, surgical and rehabilitation expenses often have less influence on the decision process. These horses typically have a high owner commitment due to the substantial financial return if surgery and recovery is successful. Additionally, it is assumed these horses will be properly cared for throughout their life, which often takes place on a breeding farm.

While a severe injury directly impacts both the owner and trainer, we must acknowledge that the racetrack—and the racing industry as a whole—is not immune. It's difficult to quantify the financial impact to the industry from a public relations standpoint when a fatality occurs on the track. It is reasonable to assume that as the number or frequency of fatal injuries increases, the financial burden grows exponentially. One recent example is the fatality cluster at Santa Anita racetrack in the winter of 2019. This event had a tremendous impact on the Southern California racing circuit and the entire racing industry. The impact went far beyond the surgical cost to any single horse.

So, what is the role of the veterinarian in this? Are we responsible for considering the financial aspects of surgery and the residual value of the horse? Are we to calculate the estimate value of a single injury on an entire industry? In this calculation, do we consider the social license granted for horse racing and the fact that many who question that social license do not distinguish between a "cheap" or "expensive" horse?

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Graduate-level researchers: Apply for Foundation fellows

Applications for annual scholarships due Aug. 2



Applications for The Foundation for the Horse Past Presidents' Research Fellow and the EQUUS Foundation Research Fellow are being accepted until Aug. 2.

The annual \$5,000 scholarships reward AAEP-member doctoral or residency students who have made significant progress in the field of equine healthcare research. Both recipients will be honored at the AAEP's 67th Annual Convention, Dec. 4–8 in Nashville, Tenn. Each will receive a \$500 stipend to support travel to the convention.

The scholarship application and descriptions are accessible at aaep.org/scholarships.

Dr. Lynn Pezzanite receives the 2019 AAEP Past Presidents' Research Fellow during the 65th Annual Convention from The Foundation for the Horse Vice Chair Dr. Anthony Bliklager, left, and Chair Dr. Rick Mitchell, right.

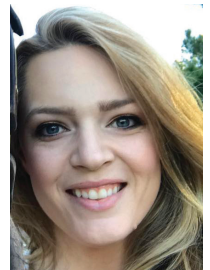
The Foundation appoints Wyatt as development officer

Summer Wyatt, a nonprofit executive with progressive experience in philanthropic leadership and program management, has joined The Foundation for the Horse as development officer.

"We are delighted to have Summer join our Foundation development team in this newly created position to support the continued growth of the AAEP's charitable arm," said David Foley, AAEP executive director.

In her new position, Wyatt engages current and prospective donors throughout the Southeastern, Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern regions of the U.S. to cultivate relation-

ships and invite financial support of The Foundation's mission to improve the welfare of horses. Wyatt most recently served as executive director of the Parelli Foundation, and she previously held management positions in the areas of animal welfare, community engagement and event management.



Summer Wyatt

Wyatt, who was raised with and continues to own and show American Saddlebreds, can be reached at swyatt@foundationforthehorse.org.

Ethics, continued

Instead, what if we evaluate a horse's injury solely from a medical standpoint? What if we removed finances from the equation? The result is a subset of horses that historically would have been humanely euthanized that could now be given a chance for survival with surgery. The two major immediate hurdles often encountered are: Who's going to pay for this and who's going to take care of my horse after? But what if there was a plan set forth by the racing industry to address these two common questions before the injury even occurs; a policy that gives horses a chance for survival without the owner bearing the entire burden of expense and aftercare; and a plan that brings various industry groups to the table to stand with the injured horse to ensure a lifelong commitment? If that existed, would you make different recommendations to your clients when faced with a catastrophic injury?

I realize this leaves you with more questions than answers, which is my intent! As an industry, and as veterinarians in the racing industry, we need to start thinking about this issue and discussing it with our colleagues and

industry partners. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to these difficult cases, and what works in one place might not work in another. But, simply put, we live in a world in which every horse fatality matters. As veterinarians, we might need to stop and pause before making a recommendation to the client. Ultimately, it is our job to put the horse first every time.

I've always said, "If we put the horse first, a lot of our problems will go away." To this end, we must ask important questions when it comes to injured horses: Why are we attempting this surgery? What is the industry's responsibility to the horse with a severe injury? What is the owner's responsibility to their injured horse? Is the easy choice always the best choice? What if my past experiences don't accurately reflect future outcomes? Should I always do things the way I have always done them?

And ultimately, just because we can, does it mean we should?