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Solving the Problem of Unwanted Horses in America

Executive Summary

Americans have a love affair with horses, yet over four and a half million American horses have been secretly slaughtered to meet a foreign demand for horsemeat since 1980. The effort to end horse slaughter in America has raised the issue of the unwanted horse in America. Horses are ingrained in American culture as sport, recreation, pleasure and companion animals, not as food animals. We admire their majestic beauty, their grace and power, and their proud spirit.

There is currently no data available on the demographics of unwanted horses, unless we accept that all horses sent to slaughter are unwanted, then we can utilize the breed types and gender of horses that have been sent to slaughter since the implementation in 2002 of the requirements of the Commercial Transportation of Horses to Slaughter Act that required owner shippers to provide data on the breed and gender.

The horse industry promotes practices that result in an overabundance of horses, early unsoundness due to conformation and genetic weaknesses exacerbated by overuse at an early age. The industry needs to make changes so as to prevent the problem, rather than just focusing on closing the barn door after the horse has escaped.

The industry must encourage owners to take responsibility for their horses and euthanize when the horse develops health and soundness issues, or is no longer of any value. Overbreeding and the breeding of horses prone to unsoundness for fashionable traits is the beginning.

To solve the problem of unwanted horses in America the horse industry must make several changes so as to prevent horses, who can easily live into their thirties, from becoming unwanted at an early age resulting in horses being passed from one owner to another in a continuous downhill slide that can end in neglect and often ends at a slaughterhouse.

Owners who can no longer keep their horses have several options depending on the horse's breed, age, level of soundness, training level, and care and management requirements. Owners can choose from retirement, leasing, donation to a horse sanctuary, donation to a horse welfare organization for adoption, or euthanasia.

Introduction

Americans have a love affair with horses, yet over four and a half million American horses have been secretly slaughtered to meet a foreign demand for horsemeat since 1980. The effort to end horse slaughter in America has raised the issue of the unwanted horse in America.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this report is to determine the various reasons horses become unwanted and to recommend solutions to the problem of unwanted horses in America.

This report focuses on how horses become unwanted, what horses are unwanted, resources available for unwanted horses, options available to horse owners who can no longer keep their horse, who will pay for the care and feeding of unwanted horses and the relationship of the unwanted horse to slaughter.

This report does not discuss the issue of horse slaughter and the pro and con arguments of horse slaughter.

Assumption

The recommendations in this report are based on the assumption that human behavior is modified when there are consequences for every action. Negative consequences will cause a change in behavior so as to avoid the negative consequence.

Methods

The information from this report came from personal experience obtained during the nine years I have volunteered for the Equine Protection Network, interviews with a Pennsylvania Humane Society Police Officer for the Large Animal Protection Society, the Executive Director of the Hooved Animal Humane Society; The American Horse Council's meeting on the Unwanted Horse, various print and online sources, and a lifetime with horses.

Limitations

Limited by financial resources and time which did not allow for a survey of veterinarians to determine how many horses they euthanized in a year compared to the number of horses sent to slaughter.

The Unwanted Horse in America

Since 1980 over four and a half million of America's horses have been slaughtered to meet a foreign demand for horsemeat. There is no demand for horsemeat in this country because Americans do not eat horsemeat, just as we do not eat dogs and cats. It goes against American culture to eat a horse.

Starting in the early 1990's there has been a growing effort across the United States to end the slaughter of America's horses. Historically horse slaughter was the horse industry's "dirty little secret". The advent of the Internet took horse slaughter out of the back barn and put it on display for horse owners, horse lovers, and the American public. Horse welfare advocates who before could not get their voices heard in horse trade publications, were now able to put information on horse slaughter on the Internet. The Internet also made communication between people faster, easier and economical.

The slaughter of two Thoroughbred racing legends, Ferdinand, the 1986 Kentucky Derby Winner, and Exceller, the only horse to ever beat two Triple Crown Winners, in foreign slaughterhouses put the issue of horse slaughter up front and personal for Thoroughbred Racing.

Passage of California's Prop 6 in 1998 making it a felony to slaughter a California horse drew attention to the horse slaughter issue and resulted in a bill being introduced in Congress, and the effort to enforce a 1949 Texas law prohibiting the sale of horsemeat. The effort resulted in an opinion by the Texas State Attorney General that Texas law did apply to the two foreign owned Texas horse slaughterhouses. An attempt to change Texas law, Texas HB 1324, introduced in 2003 which would have allowed the slaughter of horses in Texas, failed. A court battle has ensued ever since with the two Texas slaughterhouses still in operation awaiting a hearing in Federal Court.

In December 2004 President Bush signed the Omnibus Appropriations Bill which included a rider written by Montana Senator Conrad Burns, revoking protection of America's wild horses from slaughter. Recently forty-seven mustangs were slaughtered in Illinois under the new provisions. Ford Motor Company donated nineteen thousand dollars to purchase the remaining mustangs slated for slaughter already at the Cavel slaughterhouse in DeKalb, Illinois. Ford declined to become politically active and lobby against horse slaughter.

All of this activity has raised the question of what would happen to unwanted horses if it became illegal to slaughter horses in the United States.

America's Love Affair with Horses

America has a long time love affair with horses. Horses are ingrained in American culture as sport, recreation, pleasure and companion animals, not as food animals. We admire their majestic beauty, their grace and power, their proud spirit. The proud images of horses adorn government seals, and statues of horses stand proudly at our nation's capitol, many of our state capitols, and National Parks. American companies name automobiles and sports teams after horses, parades are filled with horses and every American President has been pictured with a horse.

The horse has earned its rightful place in American History having carried Sybil Ludington and Paul Revere on their famous midnight rides to rally the militia during the American Revolution. Gallant horses have carried our heroes into battle and to this day carry our fallen heroes to their final resting place on the caisson platoon. Horses have given and continue to give their lives for us – racing to put out raging fires, racing to save the sick and injured, racing across the American West to deliver the mail, and racing into our hearts on the racetracks. America fell in love with Smarty Jones in his bid to win the Triple Crown in 2004. Millions of Americans vicariously raced along with Afleet Alex in the 2005 Kentucky Derby as he raced to raise money for pediatric cancer research.

Millions more of Americans have experienced a partnership with horses participating in sporting and recreational events that have brought joy and glory into their lives. Millions of Americans who have never owned a horse enjoy the company of horses at summer camps, resorts, therapeutic riding programs, and riding stables. Horses have helped deliver food to our tables, by plowing fields, delivering our harvest to market and delivering milk to our doorstep. The one place America has not put horses, is onto our dinner tables, yet at the same time, America has allowed the horse industry to secretly dispose of unwanted horses by putting them on foreign dinner tables as a gourmet meal.

In 2004 several people died and many more risked their lives trying to save their beloved horses from raging wildfires. Americans have obviously brought horses into our families, our hopes, our dreams, and our lives. So why would Americans allow our beloved horses to become a gourmet meal?

What Horses are Unwanted?

According to JoAnne Mauger, who has investigated over two thousand horse cruelty cases in her twenty-one years as a Humane Society Police Officer, HSPO, eighteen with the Large Animal Protection Society, LAPS, of West Grove, Pennsylvania unwanted horses are those horses that, “the horse community can no longer make any money off of or generate any income from”.

According to Nat Messer D.V.M., “Unwanted horses” represent a subset of horses within the domestic equine population determined by someone to be no longer needed or

useful or their owners are no longer interested in or capable of providing care for them either physically or financially.”

There is no data available on the demographics of unwanted horses, unless we accept that all horses sent to slaughter are unwanted, then we can utilize the breed types and gender of horses that have been sent to slaughter since the implementation in 2002 of the requirements of the Commercial Transportation of Horses to Slaughter Act that required owner shippers to provide data on the breed and gender. It must be noted that the owner shippers of horses transported to slaughter have been identified as the abusers of horses during the transport to slaughter and several have been convicted under state cruelty laws.

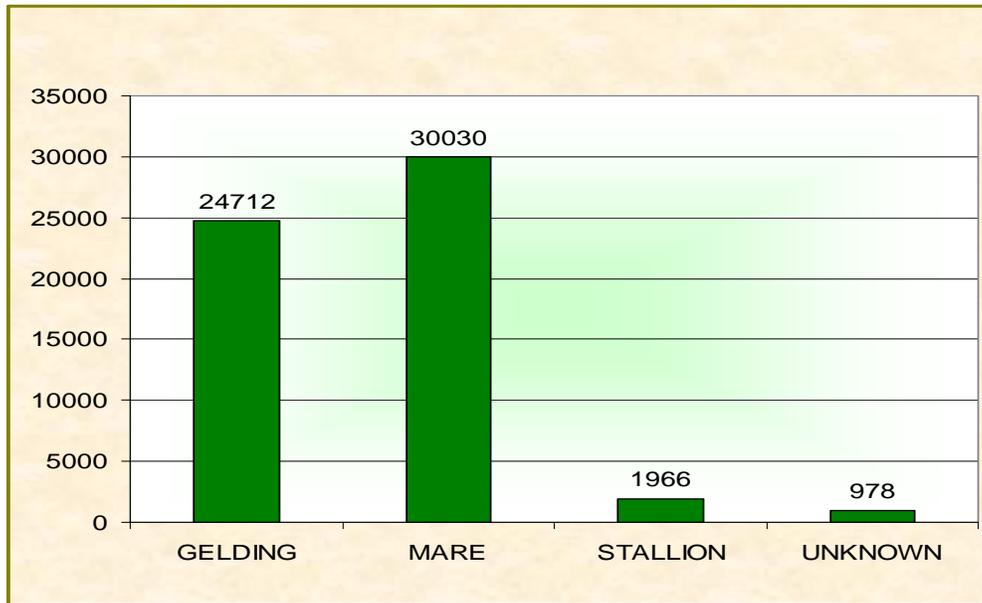
Horse welfare organizations usually do not collect the data for various reasons. Lack of resources to collect, enter, and analyze the data, and what appears to be a general lack of interest.

Horse welfare organizations have directed their resources to acquiring and rehabilitating as many horses as possible with the resources available to them. Collection of information that could be used to analyze the demographics of unwanted horses and in the case of neglected, injured, or abused horses, be used to successfully prosecute cases of neglect is not a priority as evidenced by the dearth of information available on the horses that come into their care.

Historically horse welfare organizations acquire horses from horse auctions, from owner donations, including directly from the racetrack, and law enforcement agencies, many of which are not interested in prosecuting the case and are more than happy to turn over the problem to a horse welfare organization, that may or may not be qualified to handle the requirements necessary to investigate and build a case against owners who have neglected or abused their horses. In criminal investigations law enforcement tracks the race ethnicity, gender and age of victims; the same is not true in crimes involving horse abuse or neglect.

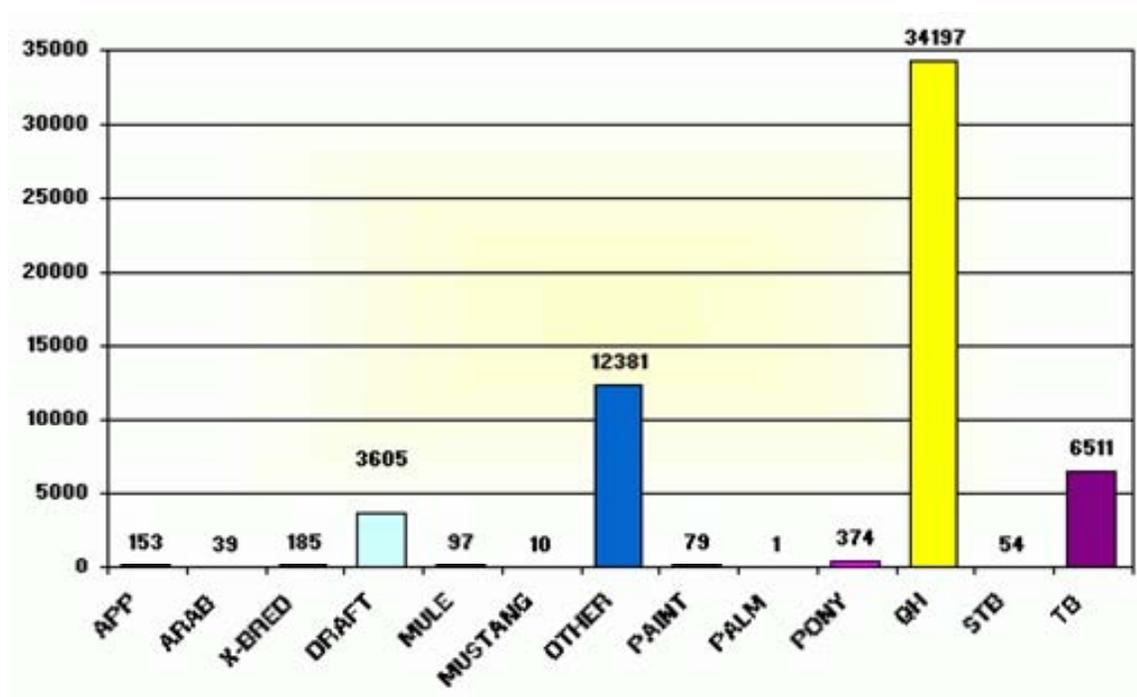
We do have information available from the Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service, APHIS, on the breed types, gender, of horses that have been slaughtered in the United States and horses shipped from the United States to Canada. The APHIS owner shipper certificates only list Thoroughbreds, Drafts, Mule, Mustang, and other. There is no breakdown for, Arabians, Paint Horses, Warmbloods, Standardbreds, Saddlebreds, Morgans, all of which are popular breeds and the last three are utilized by the Amish who we know send their horses to slaughter when they have worked the horse until the horse can no longer work. We do not have information on health, soundness, behavior, or training issues.

Figure 1
US Horses Slaughtered in US & Canadian Plants by Gender (1/1/2003 – 12/31/03)



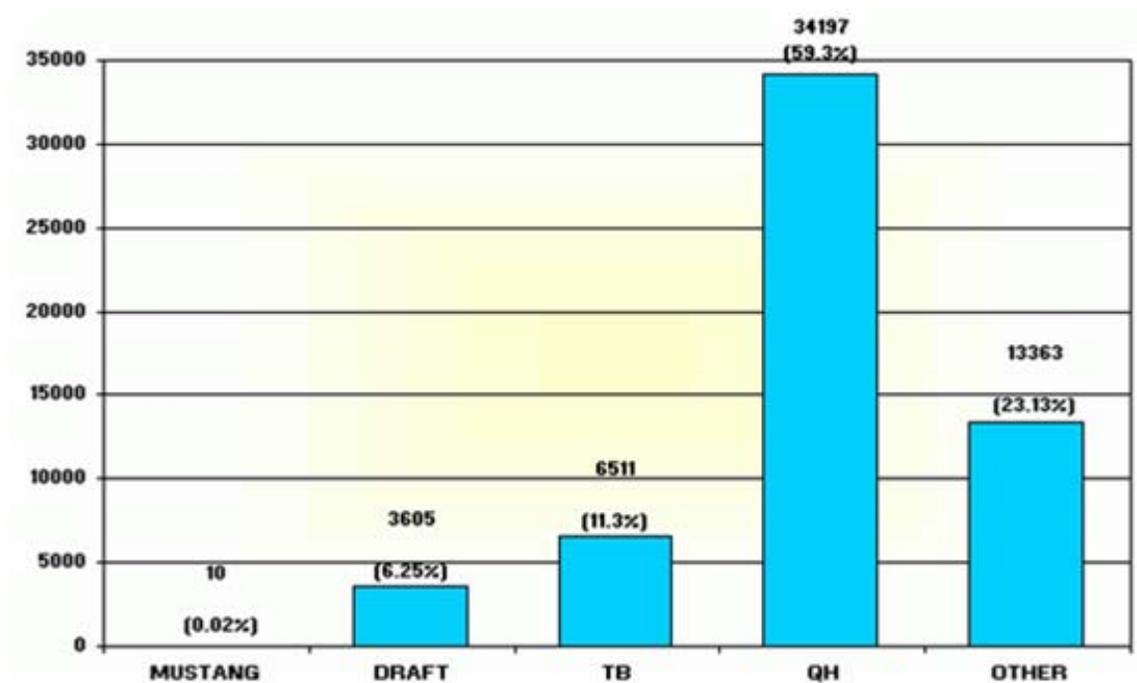
Courtesy of Cordes, Tim, D.V.M...“Take Care of Our Horses

Figure 2
US Horses Slaughtered in US & Canadian Plants by Type 1/01/2003 – 12/31/2003



Courtesy of Cordes, Tim, D.V.M...“Take Care of Our Horses

Figure 3 US Horses Slaughtered in US & Canadian Plants by Type 1/1/2003- 12/31/2003



Courtesy of Cordes, Tim, D.V.M...“Take Care of Our Horses.

Number of Unwanted Horses

The Large Animal Protection Society, LAPS, serves four Pennsylvania counties, Berks, Chester, Delaware and Lancaster, two of which are ranked first and second in the number of horses in Pennsylvania according to the May 2003 [PA Equine Industry Inventory, Economic & Demographic Characteristics](#). LAPS averages eight to ten calls a year from people who no longer want their horse and who also express an interest in locating a suitable home for their horse. Reasons cited range from lameness, financial concerns, disinterest, age and incompatibility with rider. Mauger cites age and failure to perform as the most common reasons stated by owners.

Nat T. Messer IV, D.V.M. speaking for the American Association of Equine Practitioners, AAEP, in a letter in the Thoroughbred Times in response to an editorial opposed to slaughter and criticizing the AAEP for their apparent pro slaughter stance, states that approximately 100,000 horses a year are unwanted. Included in that figure are ten to fifteen thousand wild horses removed from public lands and held in federally funded sanctuaries that have been deemed unadoptable.

Messer has failed to take into consideration that America's wild horses are wanted by the American Public. The American Public has sent thousands of letters to Congress indicating that they want America's wild horses running free on public land in their natural habitat, preserved as a national treasure the same as we have preserved Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and the Redwoods. The horse industry fails to see any use for these horses because the industry cannot profit from these horses. These horses are not part of the horse industry to be bought and sold, their worth measured in dollars and cents; America's mustangs are part of the heritage and culture of the United States to be preserved for future generations of Americans.

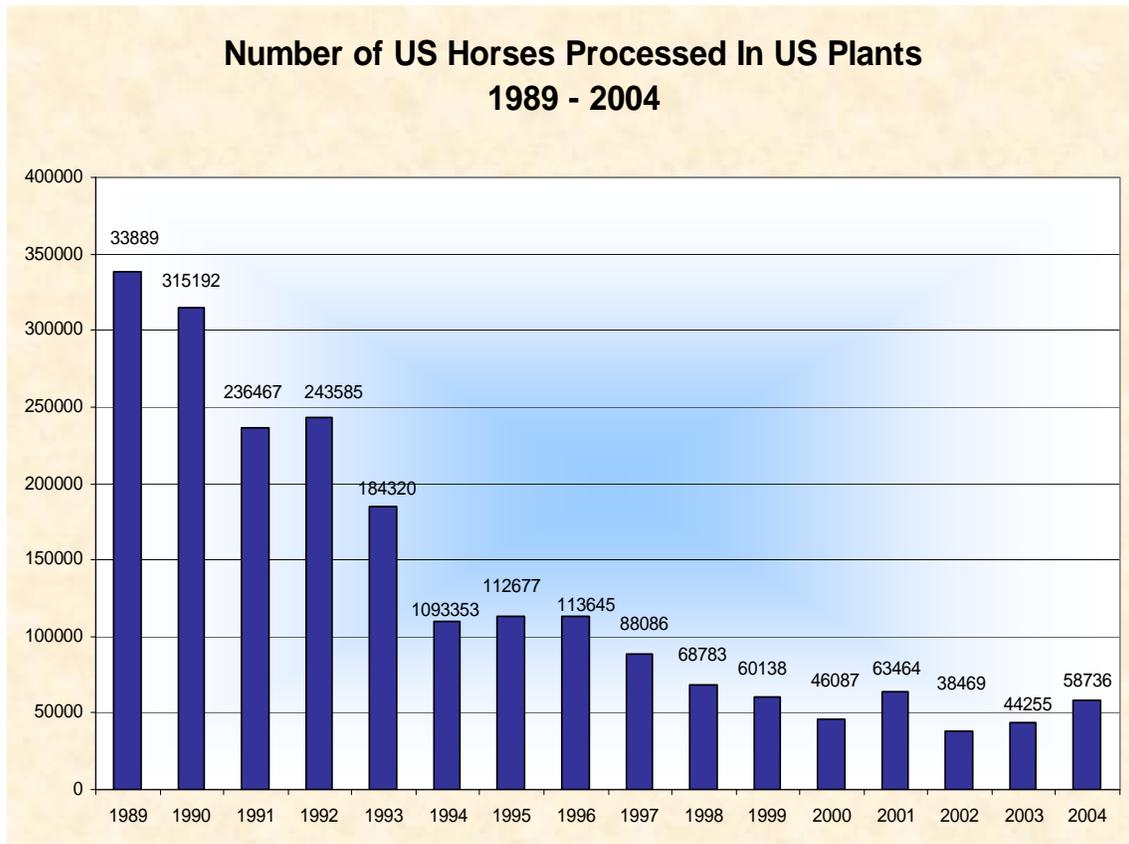
Messer also includes the approximately seventy-five thousand horses sent to slaughter in the United States and Canada as being unwanted. To make the conclusion that all horses sent to slaughter are unwanted does not take into account the fact that slaughter is profit driven. The "killer buyers" are not always unopposed in their bidding at horse auctions indicating that there are people who want the horse. Dealers send horses to slaughter motivated by profit. Dealers acquire horses through fraudulent means, often promising a good home for a horse. If owners knew the truth, many would make the decision to keep the horse themselves, continue to look for a good home for their horse or euthanize the horse.

Messer also includes the ten to fifteen thousand mares and foals that are no longer needed due to the reduction on Pregnant Mare Urine, PMU, farms. In 2003 the Women's Health Initiative, WHI, resulted in a lessened demand for the hormone replacement therapy, HRT, drug Premarin. In turn Wyeth reduced the number of farms under contract to supply pregnant mare urine, PMU. The horse slaughter numbers rose from 42,312 in 2002 to 65,976 in 2004 and as of April 23, 2005 are at rate that will approach 85,000 horses by the end of the year, numbers not seen since 1997.

These horses are simply unwanted due to the loss of demand and irresponsible breeding on the part of the PMU industry. We bring horses into this world to act as nothing more than urine making machines with no thought or planning as to what will become of these living creatures when we no longer have any use for them.

During the United States Department of Agriculture fact finding on the transport of horses to slaughter, the average age of horses at the slaughterhouse was seven to eleven years of age. Considering the fact that horses can and do live into their thirties and forties, this information begs the question, “What is the horse industry doing that is causing horses to lose their value to the point that their value has dropped to the bottom of the market, the slaughterhouse?”

Figure 4 Horses Slaughtered in 1989 -2004



Courtesy of Cordes, Tim, D.V.M...“Take Care of Our Horses.

Unwanted for Economic Reasons

Passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1986 closing the tax sheltering “passive investment” loophole that breeders used to entice wealthy Americans to invest in horses dumped tens, if not hundreds of thousands of horses on a market that could not absorb them. The opening of the floodgates resulted in a bloodbath for the horses as slaughter numbers went from 128,000 in 1985 to 345,500 with another 70,000 horses shipped to Canada in 1990.

Newspaper accounts at the time tell the stories of full term pregnant mares or pregnant mares with foals at their sides being sold at high class bloodstock sales only to be purchased by killer buyers. When questioned on the fate of the horses the ‘killer buyers’ always told the story of a nice home “out west” or in Canada. The horrible truth was discovered when double deck cattle trailers were seen pulling onto the sales grounds a couple of days later to pick up the horses.

One story with a fairly happy ending told of an entire truckload of Standardbred racehorses sold to a slaughterhouse in Texas. A husband and wife team valiantly contacted the previous owners of the horses raising the money to purchase them back. Upon arrival at the slaughterhouse in Texas they found some horses had died enroute and others were horribly injured. The once proud and majestic horses, whose every need had been attended to and who had been pampered their entire lives, stood in the slaughterhouse pens dejected with their heads hanging low to the ground. They had not been fed or watered since leaving California. On the return trip to California one mare foaled at a truck stop on Route 66 in Arizona. The foal, aptly named, “On Route 66” went on to be a stakes winning racehorse.

When Messer was questioned as to why the change in the tax laws was not mentioned in his presentation at the American Horse Council meeting on Unwanted Horses, Messer replied it was “due to a lack of time.” Messer proposed that a change in breed popularity also was a factor in the decline in the numbers of horses being slaughtered. The change in popularity is linked to the tax law changes, the breeds that were being promoted as tax shelters were the same horses that were being slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands. The Arabians, the Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, the Quarter Horses. The horses became unwanted due to tax law changes and the inability for the market to absorb the horses that were now no longer wanted.

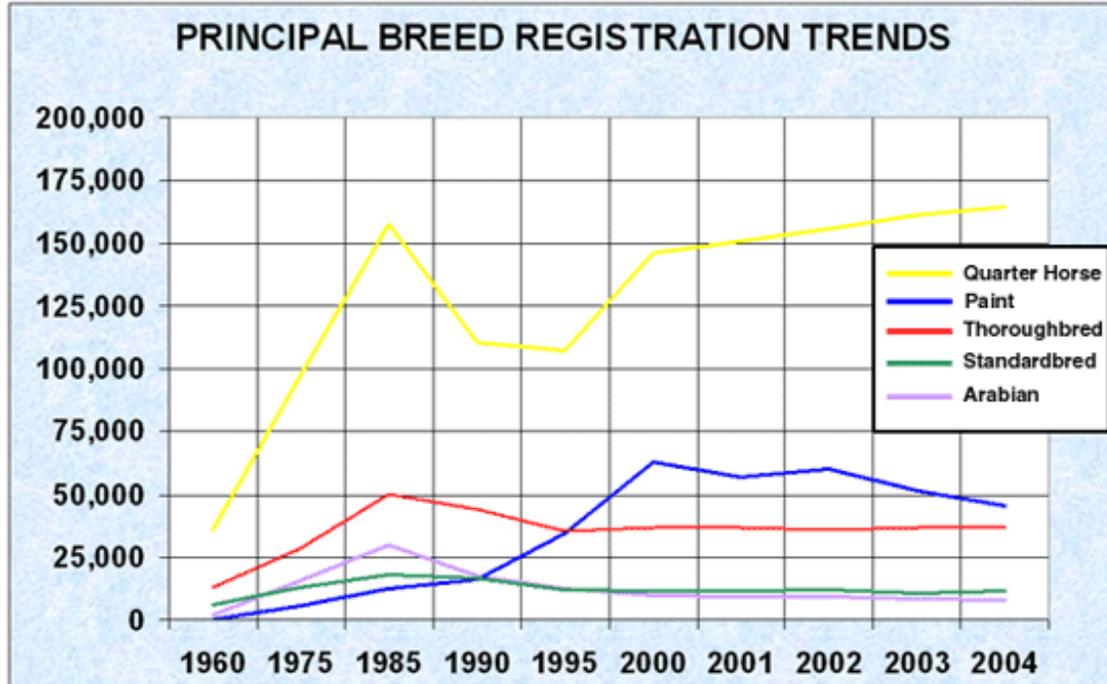
Economic reasons influence when a broodmare or a stallion becomes unwanted. Exceller and Ferdinand became unwanted when they failed to be successful as stallions. The fact that these two horses had impressive racing careers was not enough to prevent them from becoming unwanted. Exceller was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame. It was a search for Exceller in 1997 by the *Daily Racing Form*'s Mike Mullaney that led to the discovery of his death in a Swedish slaughterhouse.

Broodmares become unwanted as they age and are no longer able to produce, or if they fail to live up to the expectations of their owners. The mares are taken to sales where the downhill slide begins. The two mares, Ameridouble a Thoroughbred and dam of G1 stakes winners in Europe, and Barbret, a Standardbred, the dam of world record setter Forbidden Past and other impressive trotting horses were deemed unwanted when they could no longer produce. Instead of providing for these mares at the end of their lives, or making the decision to euthanize the mares, their owners instead chose to pawn them off on somebody else. In a terrible turn of events the mares were stolen enroute to their new home and turned up at an auction where they were sold for one hundred dollars each. The mares were recovered and returned to the farm where there journey began.

Overbreeding leads to more horses than the market can handle. Breed registries have incentive programs for breeders encouraging them to breed in hopes of a winner. Thousands of horses are bred in hopes of producing a champion, only a handful of the horses bred make it to the racetrack with an untold number of horses permanently injured in the process.

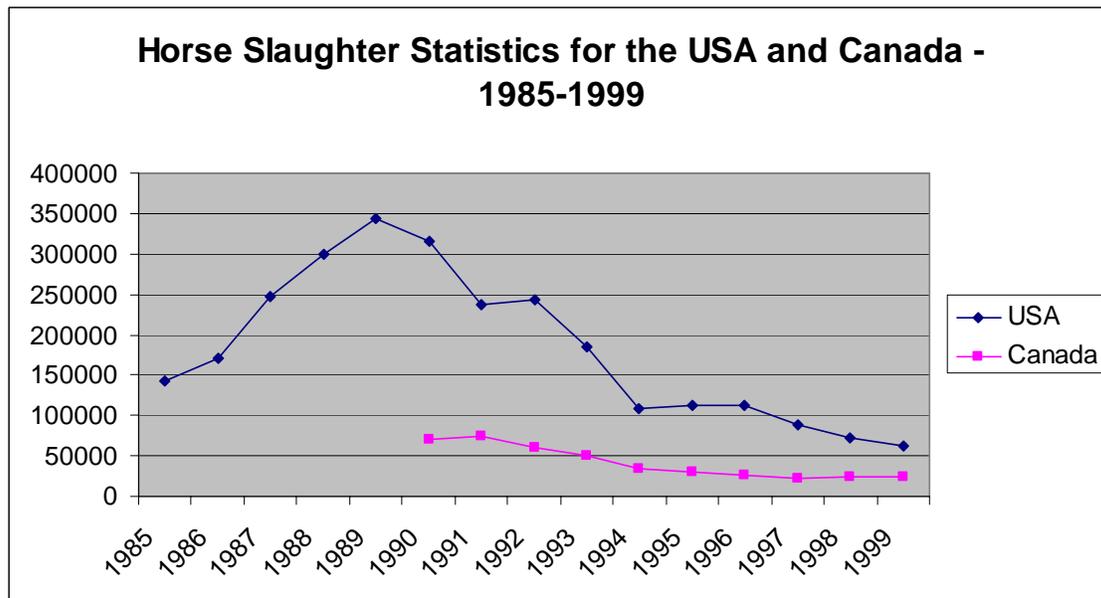
There are also the breeders who breed a mare simply because she is a mare. A pervasive thought in the horse industry is that if a mare becomes unsound for performance, she can always be used for breeding.

Figure 5 Principal Breed Registration Trends



Courtesy of the Jockey Club

Figure 6 Horse Slaughter Statistics for the USA and Canada 1985-1999



Unwanted for Soundness

What are the practices in the horse industry that are causing horses to become unsound and in turn unwanted at the average age of seven to eleven, the average age of horses at United States' slaughterhouses?

The horse industry promotes racing and competition of horses that in some cases have not even reached their second birthday. Horses do not reach full maturity until five years of age. In the United States we are crippling our horses before they are even mature. The motivating factor is money. Owners have invested thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars in stud fees, mare care, and care of the resulting foal. The sooner they can start to earn a return on their investment, the better.

Horse shows promote two and three year old futurities with large purses, while events for horses over the age of five do not have the same financial incentive. Events that involve speed, quick stops and turns, and jumping are hard on horses whose bones have yet to fully develop, and on young horse's minds. The result is young horses that are lame or have behavior and training issues due to being pushed too fast and too hard too soon in their lives.

Conformation fashion breeds problems, the same as in dogs. The Quarter Horse breeders strive for upright pasterns and small feet resulting in horses that are prone to lameness. My fourteen year old Quarter Horse, who has spent almost his entire life in the pasture with occasional light riding at a walk and trot, was recently diagnosed with Navicular Syndrome and Ringbone, both progressive conditions causing permanent degenerative lameness. This horse is lame not from use, but from genetics. Many owners

would consider it time to pass Gus on to somebody else before he progresses much further and while they still have the time to recoup some money from him.

The continued use of injured or unsound horses for the benefit of the owner or rider with no consideration for the long term effects on the horse is commonplace. Show barns encourage the continued use of injured or lame horses. The breed and horse show organizations have endorsed the practice by approving the use of non steroidal anti inflammatory, NSAIDs at ever increasing levels and combinations. It is not uncommon to see racehorses and show horses standing in tubs of ice for hours before competition.

Trainers and instructors in show barns have an incentive to keep horses and riders under their tutelage on the show circuit non-stop in the never ending race for points for year end championships and the income this non-stop showing generates. Horses in training generate training income, lesson income, coaching income, trailering income, grooming income and if they are winning a proven track record on which to draw more business. At the end of the season the ads appear in trade journals congratulating the trainer's winning stable of riders and their mounts. Horses that stay in the barn due to soreness or lameness are not generating income or racking up points toward coveted year end awards.

Then there is the pressure for owners to dump the injured horse or a horse that has any issues before the problem becomes so severe that the owner and trainer, who also acts as the agent earning a commission on the sale of the horse, lose the opportunity to recover a portion of their 'investment'. It is common for trainers and instructors to admonish riders and owners not to fall in love with their horses. Falling in love with your horse and refusing to sell the horse can mean less income for the trainer.

Trainers and instructors, who are often dealers and breeders, assure owners that their horse will be well cared for in a new home performing at a lower level for a new and upcoming rider. This can be true, but at some point the horse reaches the bottom of the barrel, a level where there is often less disposable income, and a lower standard of horsemanship.

An example of the broodmare and showhorse reaching the bottom is the Arabian mare, SF Bint Sonbollah. Described as a blue blood and considered a work of art, SF Bint Sonbollah lived the life of luxury in Florida in an air conditioned barn, her only job to produce foals as beautiful as herself. Her foals sold for tens of thousands of dollars and were exported around the world. When she could no longer produce she was discarded to a breeder who picked up barren mares inexpensively in hopes of getting one of them in foal and hitting the jackpot. Failing to become pregnant, SF Bint Sonbollah was again discarded, this time to a woman in Virginia who claimed to rescue horses, but whom had been investigated for cruelty to horses. SF Bint Sonbollah was sold to a dealer who took her to the New Holland Horse auction, known in the industry as a killer sale. SF Bint Sonbollah was again 'rescued' and taken to Berks County, Pennsylvania where she was used as a 'therapeutic' riding horse by a school teacher. That is where Humane Society Police Officer JoAnne Mauger found her, starved nearly to death and lame. The once

beautiful piece of art that existed only to be admired, never trained under saddle, was deprived of food until she nearly died in an effort to control her proud spirit. Her owner spent thousands in court defending herself and professing her love for the mare. She was found guilty and fined, but sadly SF Bint Sonbollah was returned to her and placed in a boarding facility where she later died.

Horse racing is notorious for crippling horses and then disposing of them at auction, often for slaughter. Owners continue to race horses that are injured causing injuries that make the horse nothing more than a companion at a very young age, often as early as two or three years old. If a racehorse is not making any money either because of an injury or because he is too slow, he quickly becomes unwanted. Owners want the bills to end, they do not want to keep a horse around that cannot make them any money.

After Mike Mullaney learned of the fate of Exceller and started looking at the correlation between horse racing and slaughter he traveled to Penn National Racetrack in Grantville, Pennsylvania where in his opinion every horse going to the starting gate was lame. It was his opinion that the track should be shut down.

The Amish also play a role in the unwanted horse providing an outlet for Standardbred racehorses and broodmares, American Saddlebred and Morgan showhorses whose careers have ended in the show ring or the breeding shed. Unfortunately for the horses that fall into the hands of the Amish, it is a one way ticket to hell. Amish horses are routinely driven and worked into the ground regardless of injury. When there is nothing left, the Amish send the horse to the auction house to get the last few dollars out of the horse. For the horse who was once accustomed to living the life of luxury on a fancy breeding farm or in a show barn, the end is filled with hard work, brutal treatment and a lack of proper veterinary care.

The common thread in all of these scenarios is the beginning of the downhill slide - the passing on of the horse and his problems to someone other than the person who has received the most benefit from the horse. It is very common in the horse industry for the owner trying to relieve themselves of this horse that has now become a liability, to take steps to disguise any soundness or behavior issues the horse has and to sell the horse while they can still make some money on the horse.

According to Messer, "Unwanted horses range from being essentially normal, healthy horses of varying ages and breeds to horses with some type of disability or infirmity; horses that are unattractive; horses that fail to meet their owner's expectations for their intended use, eg: athletic ability; horses with non-life-threatening diseases; horses that have behavioral problems; or horses that are truly mean or dangerous. In many cases, these horses have had multiple owners, have been shipped from one sale barn, stable, or farm to another, and have ultimately been rejected as eligible for any sort of responsible, long-term care."

What Happens to Unwanted Horses?

When horses become unwanted due to their inability to generate income, whether it be the broodmare who can no longer produce, the performance horse who has slid down through the ranks from a top level competitor to a lesson horse, the camp horse lamed by years of use, the racehorse that is too slow or injured and can no longer race or the Amish horse that has been driven and worked into the ground to the point where they are lamed and often underweight, there is a common thread among their owners – the desire to pass the problem onto somebody else.

When asked what happens to these horses, JoAnne Mauger, of LAPS stated, “They keep getting passed on and on, ridden into the ground, or they end up in somebody’s backyard, or at a slaughter auction.”

The pro slaughter forces in the horse industry, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, AAEP, the American Veterinary Association, AVMA, the American Quarter Horse Association, AQHA, and the American Paint Horse Association, APHA, and several state horse councils put forth the argument that if horse slaughter were to become illegal, unwanted horses would suffer a worse fate than the slaughterhouse where in their opinion the killing of a horse with a four inch retractable bolt and the slitting of their throat is humane euthanasia. Pro slaughter forces argue that unwanted horses will be neglected and allowed to slowly starve to death, or abandoned, by their owners, or a black market will ship the horses illegally to Mexico where the conditions in the slaughterhouses are not regulated as they are in the United States.

Carolyn L. Stull, PhD, Veterinary Medicine Extension, University of California, Davis, speaking at the American Horse Council meeting on the Unwanted Horse, stated, “From recent personal communication with several directors of Societies and Animal Control services in California, there does not appear to be an increase in the number of equine neglect cases since the passing of Proposition 6. The number of requests for equine training of Animal Control or Humane officers has not noticeably increased (personal communication) over the last few years, and this may be supported by an apparent lack of growth in the number of equine investigations conducted in their jurisdiction.”

The pro slaughter forces cannot back up their statements that horse owners will neglect, starve, or abandon their horses if slaughter is removed as an option. In my experience in the horse industry, including seventeen years operating a for profit retirement farm for horses and nine years in horse welfare, the problem is a lack of knowledge and responsibility on the part of horse owners as to the fate of horses that have soundness or training issues. The owners I have spoken to who are looking for a home for their horse want to find the horse a good home, the thought of having to make the decision to euthanize is emotionally disturbing to them. These are not owners who would decide to neglect their horse if they could not keep it, although there have been cases of people who fail to properly care for their horses due to ignorance and a failure to act responsibly and obtain proper veterinary care for their horse. It is the rare owner who

knowingly takes their horse to the auction with the intent of selling the horse to the killers.

The common scenario is the owner gives the horse to a person who promises to provide a loving home. It is a common ploy among dealers to promise the owner a good home and then turn around and take the horse up to the auction. Many owners fail to check on the horse in person, content to take the person's word that the horse is living happily ever after in a lush pasture with a family that loves him. Owners don't check because they want to believe the happy story, and what would they do if they found out otherwise?

Recommendations for Horse Owners

When a horse due to age, infirmities, or unsoundness can no longer be used then horse owners need to realize that the options for their horse are limited and they need to ask themselves some simple questions.

“If I was offered this horse, would I take him? If not, why not? Owners then must realize that if they themselves, who profess to love this horse and yet would not take him, why would they think somebody else would want him?

Often their response is that they believe that their high maintenance horse that cannot be used for anything other than a companion or a babysitter is in demand by owners looking for a horse to perform this duty. The reality is that horse owners do not want high maintenance horses for this duty, owners want ponies, or miniature horses because of the lower costs involved in caring and feeding the pony. Owners are not looking for companions that cost more to maintain than the horse that is in need of a companion.

According to JoAnne Mauger of the Large Animal Protection Society when she explains to owners of horses with issues that limit their use that there is no market for their horse and the best option for the horse is euthanasia, owners refuse to accept the advice accusing Mauger of being mean. In Mauger's opinion owners want to feel good and they want to get rid of their problem.

The reasons given by owners for not accepting Mauger's advice is, “they cannot put their horse down”, “they love the horse too much”, “it would make them sad”, and” it is too hard of a decision to make”.

The result is the horse gets passed on. In Mauger's experience attractive horses sometime have it worst of all. Owners will fill them with various medications in an effort to enable the horse to continue to perform and in an effort to resell them. The horse often ends up going through several sales in a short period of time. People see this attractive horse at the auction; they purchase the horse thinking they have located a treasure in amongst the trash at the dump. After a few days the drugs wear off and the horse is

shipped back to the auction drugged again and sometime with falsified papers because nobody wants to get stuck holding the bag and everybody wants to make sure they get their money back.

Horses that get passed on from home to home as they get older mimic the story of Black Beauty. Recently three horses that had been used by a local well respected Therapeutic Riding Center were offered up for 'free to good homes'. Why? All of the horses were in their late twenties or early thirties, could no longer perform, and or needed expensive medication to be maintained. These horses had served for years, but when the cost of maintaining them exceeded their value, it was time to pass them off to somebody else.

Resources for Horse Owners

Owners who can no longer keep their horses have several options depending on the horse's breed, age, level of soundness, training level, and care and management requirements. Owners can choose from retirement, leasing, donation to a horse sanctuary, donation to a horse welfare organization for adoption, or euthanasia.

Horse retirement farms provide owners with a facility to board their horse in a retirement setting, often for less than the expense to maintain the horse at a riding stable.

There are literally hundreds of horse welfare organizations that have emerged during the past ten to fifteen years. Some of these organizations specialize in retraining and rehabilitating retired racehorses, others focus on providing sanctuary with no adoption for horses donated to the program, and others accept donated horses or purchase horses at auction to prevent them from going to slaughter. Owners need to determine if the organization is economically sound, practices accepted horse management practices, and has the resources to perform, (and does perform) annual inspections of adopted horses in person.

There have been people representing themselves as welfare organizations who were really wolves in sheep's clothing. Owners were promised a wonderful home for their horse and even signed an agreement. Later it was discovered that the 'rescue' was selling the horses at auction, often to slaughter.

Historically horse owners have given companion or limited use horses away for free with the promise of a good home. There are too many greedy and uncaring people in this world to risk the welfare of a horse by engaging in this practice. It seems to be human nature though to take the easy way out. It is easier to believe the horse is doing fine than to go and check on the horse and discover that the horse has been disposed of or has been neglected.

The decision to put a horse down is never easy. The reality is that there are not enough homes for all of the pasture sound horses, as the horse welfare organizations quickly learned. The risk of horses falling into a bad situation and or being sold for

slaughter is a very real possibility. Death by humane euthanasia is preferred than a slow downward spiral that ends at a slaughterhouse.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Horse owners need to become better educated on horse slaughter and how horses end up at the slaughterhouse. Owners need to accept the fact that there are not enough homes for horses with soundness and training issues. Either the owner pays to retire the horse, leases the horse, donates the horse to a horse welfare organization, or euthanizes the horse. Owners have to realize that at some point somebody is going to be the owner of the horse at the end of their lives, better it is a person who cares about the horse, than one whose only motivation is profit.

Horse breeders have to become more selective in their breeding, but as long as the horses with the fashionable conformation are winning in the show ring, breeders are going to breed what sells. I strongly believe that if the owners who purchase and use these horses would have to maintain the horse for its entire life, or be the one holding the lead shank when the horse hits the ground for the last time, owners will choose not to purchase a horse that becomes unsound at the age of seven to ten because of genetics.

Owners will take better care of their horses if the trash dump was not so readily available. As JoAnne Mauger, LAPS, stated, "Every Monday is trash day up at New Holland and you have the rescues and dealers up their picking through the trash to see what they can take home and sell for a profit. What they don't pick up, the 'killers' are more than willing to take." The availability of horse slaughter guarantees that there will always be a bottom market figure for horses resulting in people who will tell an owner exactly what they want to hear so they will give them the horse. The owner feels good about finding the horse a 'good home', and the dealer has just made themselves a tidy little profit. Rarely if ever does an owner check on the horse, and if they do and discover they have been had, there is almost never anything in writing. The horse is long gone to the slaughterhouse and the former owner is not willing to hire an attorney.

The equine veterinarians need to realize that they are going to have to be willing to euthanise horses that have soundness issues, training issues, or have no economical value except for slaughter. When veterinarians are faced with having to euthanise thousands of horses a year, unless they enjoy killing horses, I believe the veterinarians will be motivated to practice medicine, management, and reproduction practices that not only prolong a horse's usefulness, but also prevent horses from becoming unsound and unwanted at a relatively early age.

The breed registries and horse show organizations need to decrease the incentives for younger horses, and instead increase the rewards and incentives for older horses. Instead of racing to see who can have the youngest horse win the class or the race, why not instead strive for the oldest *sound* horse.

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