

Why Should You Care about the Public's Opinion on 2-Year-Old Horseracing?

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Note from editor: An important part of the mission of our program includes undergraduate education, specifically with our Equine Science and Management undergraduate degree program. In a class taught by Camie Heleski, a faculty member and lecturer within the program – is one designed to present provocative, often controversial issues that are current to the equine industry. In EQM 305, "Equine Industry Issues," students are introduced to topics, heard from speakers, researched information and communicated about industry issues in written and oral formats. The course is designed to expose students to hot button issues in the industry and encourage them to research and formulate well-communicated opinions about those issues. One avenue made available to this course is publishing some of those stories here.

The mainstream media plays a huge role in the information the average person has about the Thoroughbred racing industry. Unless someone is directly involved in the industry itself, the nuances of the day-to-day training and handling of these horses unfortunately remains in the shadows.

Being on the outside of the realm of racing, 2-year-old racing can seem barbaric. Animal rights activists, like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (CPR), amongst others, have taken this perspective and run with it.

Imagine having no experience in the industry, or even with horses.

In one ear CPR is saying, "The benefit of racing 2-year-olds is simply economic." ("2-year-old Racing," 2019). In the other ear are leading racing industry veterinarians like Percy Sykes saying, "There's a great incentive to race their horses too young, too immature" ("2-year-old Racing," 2019).

Most equestrians know that a horse is not fully skeletally developed until around 4 to 5 years old; add that knowledge with highly respected opinions speaking up about this issue and it looks as if there is only one morally correct answer. If that is the case, then why is it still acceptable to race 2-year-old horses?

It can be deceptively easy to conclude any injury occurring in a horse under a human's care is due in some aspect to that human's actions. In reality, however, how much of a difference to the mortality rate in young horses does being domesticated and trained for the purpose of racing make? Horses are precocial animals, being relatively independent at birth, which means they depend on their legs from the moment they are born to survive. A truth for all horses, but especially so in feral populations, horses need to be able to sprint away from predators and travel long distances on uneven ground from a very young age.

A study compared the mortality rates between juvenile-aged feral horses (13%) and intensively-managed Thoroughbred foals (4.7-11%) (Rogers, Bolwell, & Gee, 2012). The mortality rates from the study shows the horses bred and managed for Thoroughbred racing are actually quite similar to, if not lower than, the feral horse populations included in the study. All this shows is how well cared for the horses in this industry are. No one hopes for a horse to break-down on the track, especially those who care for them every day.

Evolution has shaped the horse's anatomy in a way that the earlier a horse can exercise its legs, the stronger they will be. One study was done which looked at a group of Thoroughbred foals given

a 30% greater workload than normally raised foals, which resulted in “increased strength in the third metacarpal diaphysis, but also with significantly larger size of the third metacarpal distal epiphysis,” ultimately increasing the tolerance of the fetlock joint to the high spring loads involved in race training (Rogers, Bolwell, & Gee, 2012).

The earlier the introduction of exercise, the higher the ‘biochemical heterogeneity’ which stimulates growth of cartilage and other soft tissues in the horse’s lower leg. This claim is again supported by a separate study comparing a group of racehorses introduced to early exercise and another group that was not. The results showed a decreased risk of fetlock joint pain and loss of function of the fetlock joint compared to the control group (Rogers, Kidd & Firth, 2010).

Although there is not nearly enough research being done on this issue, the research that has been done clearly shows there is a benefit to the horse by starting training early.

So, there is a benefit to training early while the horse is still growing, but what effect does early training have on the rest of that horse’s racing career? Do horses that race at 2 have a shorter career than those started later? A study done on the 2001/2002 foal crop of Thoroughbred racehorses in New Zealand shows the opposite effect. When compared to horses that entered their first race at 3 years old or older, the 2-year-olds consistently had more race starts and a longer career length (Tanner, Rogers, & Firth, 2011).

The study also concluded that prolonged “high-speed exercise has a protective effect on the risk of fracture and has been shown to be positively associated with racing performance (2006, 2008, & 2009, as cited in Tanner, et. al., 2011).

The issue facing many in the equine community in this circumstance is not the moral need to protect these beloved animals, but instead the need to be well-informed on all sides of the subject.

Stronger growth plates, more developed cartilage, higher tolerance to joint load, decreased risk of fracture, better racing performance, more starts and a longer career are all benefits of early training shown by research done on 2-year-old racehorses. Yet, much of the public remains uneducated to these benefits.

The industry of horseracing at the end of the day is driven by its spectators, like most all other forms of sport. If the public is upset with the industry and stops watching and supporting it, then there will come a time that sport ceases to exist, along with the passion and livelihoods of so many. There is a burden of research on everyone involved in this issue, especially those with high credentials. The public, the spectators, are looking to those in the equine community to know how they should react to claims made by others.

References

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