

running for Their Lives—The racing industries

Derby Winner Dinner

In 2006, the world watched in horror as Barbaro went down at the Preakness, dashing his owners' hope for the Triple Crown. There was a public outpouring of emotion. Unbeaten in six races before the Preakness, Barbaro was potentially worth \$30 million as a breeding stallion, so every effort was made to save him. He lived for eight months but was finally euthanized in early 2007—and the world grieved.

The upside of the accident was that it at least brought some attention to the plight of racehorses less famous and valuable than Barbaro. *Newsweek* reported, “If Barbaro weren't potentially worth millions of dollars, or if his owners weren't wealthy themselves, the steps he took on the track at Pimlico very likely would have been his last.”⁴⁰

The week Barbaro died, horse racing was discussed on *Larry King Live*. Jack Hanna, from the Columbus Zoo, was interviewed. We in the animal rights movement get a little perturbed when Jack gets trotted out and called an animal lover. One of the lesser-known biographical facts about that animal lover is that he appeared in a TV commercial in 1998 urging voters to oppose a ban on dove hunting in Ohio, helping to defeat the proposal at the polls. Dove hunting! On *Larry King Live* we saw him treated as an expert on all things animal. After PETA's Lisa Lange described the dark side of horse racing, Hanna represented what had happened to Barbaro as some sort of freak accident. He said he had read statistics of the numbers of animals dying years ago, but he also said, “I don't think we have those numbers dying today, especially the way these horses are cared for.”⁴¹

Lange retorted that seven hundred to one thousand racing horses are euthanized every year. It is sad to think that the public might have been tempted to take the word of well-liked Jack Hanna over the radical gal from PETA. But in fact, just after Barbaro's accident, an Associated Press article informed us that 704 horses died while racing in 2005 in the United States and Canada—and that number did not include those who died in training.⁴² As a *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist wrote, “It is not something they talk about much in their advertising, but horses die in this sport all the time—every day; every single day.”⁴³

Karen Dawn

Lange also noted that racehorses are given illegal and legal drugs that mask injuries. Hanna said, “As far as drugs, my understanding is these horses are checked even better than human beings like ballplayers are, before and after a game. So it’s hard to believe that those kinds of drugs, as she says, are used in today’s racing field.” But in 2006, *USA Today* reported, “The number of racehorses that failed drug tests in California has nearly doubled since 2000, and the offenses rarely result in disqualification or other stiff penalties.” It told us that California registered 142 violations in 2005.⁴⁴



The veterinarian Holly Cheever worked for years in the horse-racing industry. In an interview on Los Angeles’s KPFK Radio she told me that horses are trained and made to race even when injured, with drugs masking the injuries, as there is a saying in the racing industry, “The horse ain’t making you no money if it is standing in its stall.”⁴⁵ A story on National Public Radio supported what we learned from Cheever. It said that anti-inflammatory drugs make it possible to keep training

All the World's a Cage: Animal Entertainment

horses through exacerbating injuries, and that “few thoroughbreds in the U.S. race without medication.”⁴⁶

I take no pleasure in revealing that Hanna offered opinions as facts on topics about which he did not know enough to comment accurately—though any doves reading this book might be having a good laugh. I think it is important, however, to bring the truth to light, as Hanna often comes up against real animal advocates on talk shows, and viewers have a right to know whom they can and cannot believe.

During the KPFK interview cited above, Dr. Holly Cheever explained why horses “break down” on the track. They start training at age one, before their growth plates have closed. She said, “No sports physiologist would ever let you overrun a human athlete the way we overrun horses at such young ages.” Horses that break down on the track almost always get killed immediately.

Other horses get dumped. The sheer volume of animals guarantees it. Cheever explained that to get a few dozen top-notch race foals every year, a few thousand are bred, and most of them, unsuccessful, will be discarded. Even most of the winners, almost all lame by age five or six, are discarded. She said, “There are a few good homes, but most of the horses end up bouncing from good homes to bad homes, till they end up being very neglected in someone’s back lot somewhere, alone, uncared for, without veterinary care. Then I get called in by the police, and I am looking at twenty horses who are just a rack of bones full of injuries and overgrown hooves and chronic arthritic problems from their stressful life as racehorses.”

Every year thousands of horses haven’t gone to homes at all, they’ve gone straight to slaughter. Cheever said, “The breeders and trainers don’t call it going to slaughter, they call it going to auction, though they know darn well there is not a huge market for half-grown thoroughbreds who really don’t have any particular future. They get bought for meat.”

That issue got some coverage when the story broke that the 1986 Kentucky Derby winner, Ferdinand, had died in 2001 in a Japanese slaughterhouse and had been made into pet food.

I will discuss later, in chapter 8, bills likely to pass Congress that are intended to ban horse slaughter in the United States. The American Veterinary Medical Association

Karen Dawn

(AVMA) doesn't support them, because if we outlaw horse slaughter we will still have an excess of animals—many of whom are bred for racing. The AVMA suggests that if people are not allowed to send horses to slaughter in the United States, they will be abandoned or left rotting in backyards. Their opposition points to an important fact: Legislation to ban horse slaughter is part of the puzzle, but it is not the complete solution to the woes caused by the racing industry.

After Barbaro's injury, while veterinarians fought to save his life, the *New York Times* sports columnist William C. Rhoden shared a contrasting and more typical scenario in a piece headed "An Unknown Filly Dies, and the Crowd Just Shrugs":

There was no array of photographers at Belmont Park yesterday, no sobbing in the crowd as a badly injured superstar horse tried to stay erect on three legs. There was no national spotlight.

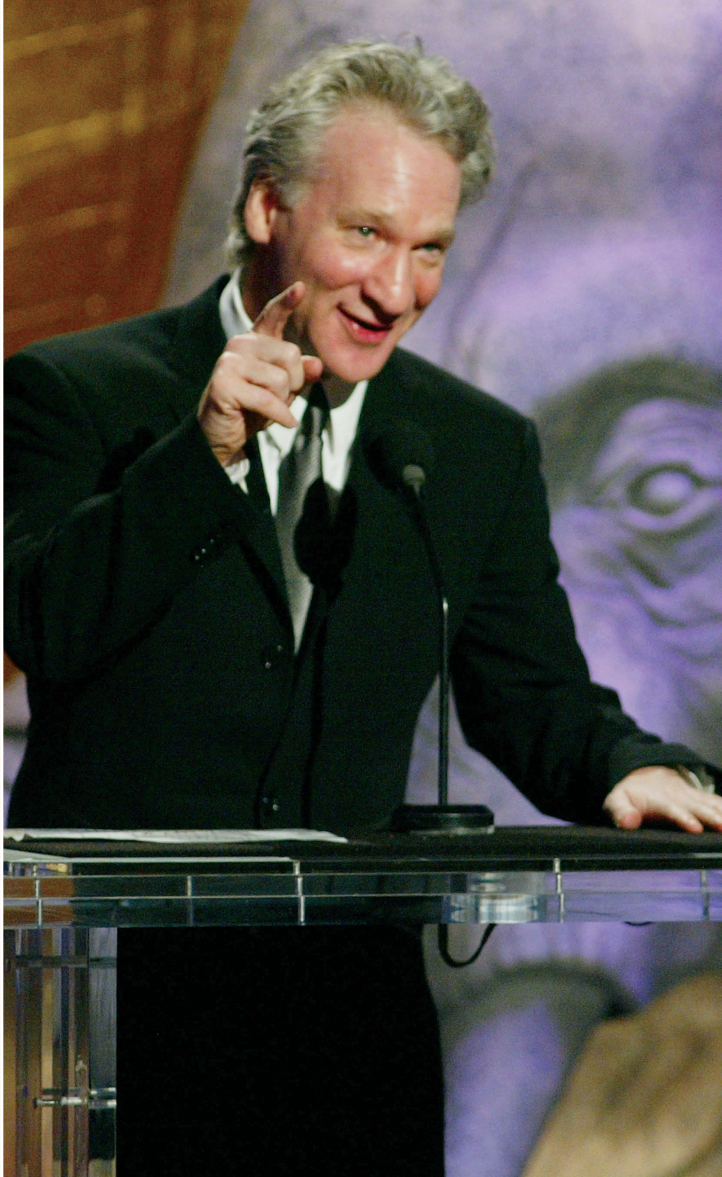
Instead, there was death. In the seventh race at Belmont, a four-year-old filly named Lauren's Charm headed into the home-stretch. As she began to fade in the mile-and-an-eighth race on the grass, her jockey, Fernando Jara, felt her struggling, pulled up and jumped off.⁴⁷

We read of Lauren's Charm being shot and carted away. Rhoden commented,

The scene was in stark contrast to what unfolded at Pimlico last Saturday when the Kentucky Derby winner, Barbaro, severely fractured his ankle in the opening burst of the Preakness. A national audience gasped; an armada of rescuers rushed to the scene. In the days that followed, as the struggle to keep Barbaro alive took full shape, there was an outpouring of emotion across the country and heartfelt essays about why we care so much about these animals.

But I'm not so sure we do, and I'm not so sure the general public fully understands this sport.

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“People always say, the horse likes it—he wants to be broken. How do you know he likes it? What are you, f**king Mr. Ed? He told you he likes it? A bit in your mouth pulling on you. What’s that, like when you first get into spanking? Oh yeah, kind of sexy. No, I am sorry, if you get on an animal’s back I think he has every right to get you off his back”
(Bill Maher).

Quote from National Animal Rights Conference, Los Angeles, 2003