

The Political Animal: Wayne Pacelle: American Horseracing at a Crossroads

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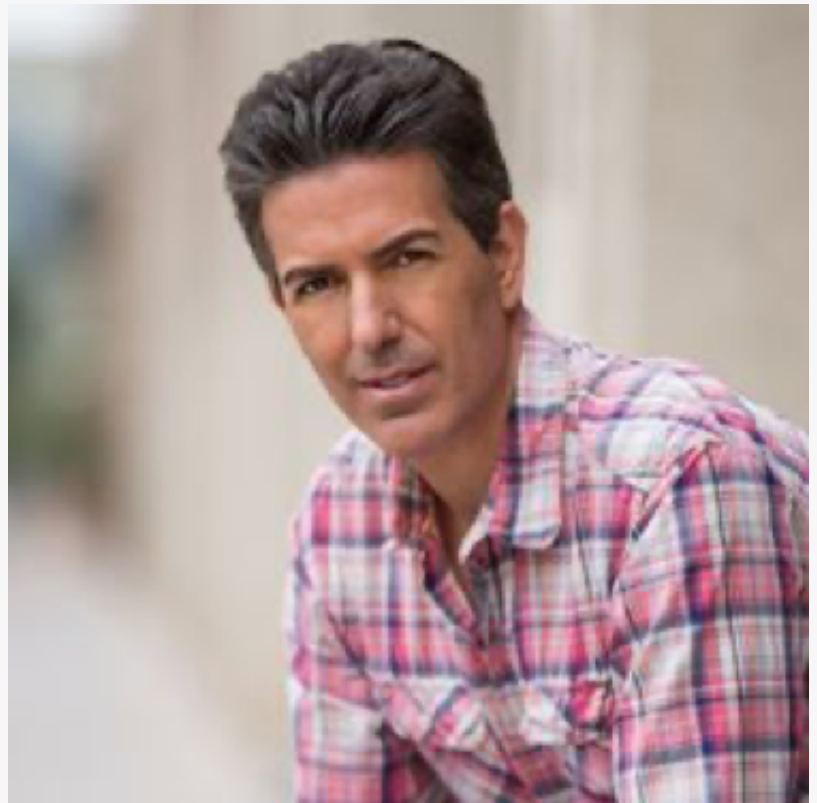
The Super Bowl will be live broadcast to as many as 100 million people in early February, demonstrating again the immense popularity of the football in America. It's maintained stratospheric levels of popularity even though it's courted criticism and controversy, including over head injuries and cognitive dysfunction suffered by players of this generation and preceding ones.

While there are plenty of moms who won't let their kids play football because of the health risks, stadiums are packed and so many millions of us tune in during the regular season and the playoffs. Even the Super Bowl commercials -- with their often clever and humorous themes and high-production values -- will count tens of millions of live and online viewers and are an entertaining sideshow hitched to the sports spectacle.

It's a mighty different circumstance for horse racing. In terms of fan enthusiasm, attendance at events, television audience, and advertising, there's no comparison. The industry's fortunes are waning. Perhaps the biggest thing horse racing and football have in common are the head injuries, with the jockeys suffering their fair share of blows to the brain when they and their mounts tumble on the dirt or the turf.



The Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs



Wayne Pacelle

Sir Barton became the first horse, in 1919, to claim the Triple Crown of Thoroughbred racing. Back in those days, winning three marquee races back to back was a major cultural moment, and horse racing was ascendant. It gave people hope after the trauma of World War I and gave kids something to dream about.

It survives today partly because major gambling companies -- originally just based in Las Vegas and Atlantic City -- expanded their footprint by cutting deals to offer casino-style wagering at the tracks. These co-located operations offered slots, blackjack, roulette, and other games of chance and traditional racing, with some of the take from the casino gambling augmenting the purse money for tracks and often keeping the lights on above the oval raceway.

But at many of these "racino" operations, it's become a tale of two cities. The card tables are often full and the slot machines blinking and blinging and buzzing on the inside, while at the outdoor venue, the horses and their jockeys heave and hurtle down the track in front of nearly empty bleachers.

The Triple Crown races still make it into the Sports Pages of America's major dailies. But the appeal is waning and the interest in the highest-profile horse racing events crests and falls very quickly, and horse racing is soon forgotten until the next Kentucky Derby. Few young people are attracted to the sport, and the fan base seems finite and it is aging, graying, and male.

There are many causes for this decline -- which has been even far less acute than the precipitous decline in greyhound racing -- but one of them surely is the treatment of the animals.

That's especially the case at the minor-league tracks, with their aging infrastructure, stale and smoke-filled haunts, and dreary atmosphere. The horses who fill the cards at these tracks are, more often than not, running for their lives. When they're not in the money, the horses are all too often walked up the ramp of a trailer driven by a kill-buyer and taken on a long, one-way trip to the abattoir.

They are bound for Canada and Mexico where small businesses slaughter horses for export. They butcher them and shrink-wrap the meat, and then sell the slabs to buyers in Italy, France, Belgium, and Japan for the small set of people interested in that breed of meat.

But that's not the only problem with American horse racing. American racetracks are turning into crash sites, with hundreds of horses are put down after suffering catastrophic injuries in competition. We don't see football players dying on the field, and we shouldn't have to see horses dying on the track at alarming rates.

In 2019, 38 horses died at Santa Anita Park, where The Breeders' Cup was held in November. The calamitous season ended with the death of Mongolian Groom in the final championship race -- just 200 yards from the finish line. Like most horses, he was running on drugs. And in recent weeks more deaths have occurred at Santa Anita and other tracks across America: Florida, Louisiana, and New York -- sparking more national outrage from Americans, and more bad press.

Unlike the NFL -- which has one set of rules for all the teams, athletes, trainers, and owners, no matter where they play -- horseracing operates under an outdated, state-based, patchwork of medication rules even though it is a national industry. This balkanization of the sport creates confusion and risk for owners and trainers and contains gaps in rules and enforcement. The lax rules of some states continue to contribute to the multitude of deaths, and while many professional sports have taken crucial steps to rid their games of doping, the racing industry continues to peddle them.

But there are some fixes that have the potential to turn around the fortunes of the industry. One would be to pass the Safeguard American Food Exports Act, which would ban the slaughter of American horses for human consumption. American racetracks should not be a meeting place for horse trainers and kill buyers. Enacting this legislation would foist the responsibility on owners and trainers to provide lifetime care for horses. We expect that of pet owners, and it's the least we should expect of horse owners.

A second critical step is to pass the Horseracing Integrity Act. Introduced by U.S. Reps. Paul Tonko, D-N.Y., and Andy Barr, R-Ky., with 229 cosponsors, and U.S. Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and Martha McSally, R-Ariz., with 25 cosponsors, it would greatly improve regulatory standards, ban the use of medication on race day, and level the playing field for everyone invested in horseracing — our horses, jockeys, trainers, owners and fans alike.

The bill's backed by a broad base of industry players, including members of the Coalition for Horseracing Integrity, which range from The Jockey Club, The Stronach Group, The Belmont, The Breeders' Cup, Water, Hay, Oats Alliance, racetracks and animal protection groups.

The bill seeks to protect American racehorses through the establishment of a national, uniform standard for drugs and medication in horse racing. It would also grant drug rulemaking, testing, and enforcement oversight to a private, non-profit, self-regulatory independent organization managed by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) – the governing body that runs the Olympic anti-doping program.

In the past one hundred years since Sir Barton claimed the Triple Crown, there have been only twelve others that have achieved the same – including legends like War Admiral and Secretariat – some doped and some not. The 2018 winner Justify was one that ran on drugs, and he's been plagued by bad press since the facts came to light last year. Justify failed a drug test after winning the Santa Anita Derby in 2018 – a qualifier that preceded the sweep of The Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont.

American horseracing is addicted to drugs, and it's time for a Congressional intervention. The reformers within the industry, including the Jockey Club, have it right, and we applaud Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Illinois, chair of a key Energy and Commerce subcommittee, for announcing a hearing on the bill on Tuesday.

Horses are the center of the enterprise of American horse racing, and care of horses should logically be their priority. They are showing the way forward for the industry, and if their proposed reforms are not adopted, it's not hard to imagine that the sparse crowds at the tracks will further erode and the handle will all but vanish. And the next generation that the industry needs to survive will treat the enterprise as a pariah rather than a form of entertainment and sport that they can responsibly enjoy.

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