

Horse Racing: The Need for Consideration of the Ethics of Exposure to Risk

*The need for debate on the level of
risk which is ethically acceptable*

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‘McKelvey is 174th horse to die in a race in just one year’

(Johnson 2008)

The Independent, Racing Online article

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

- In March 2006 nine horses were fatally injured during the Cheltenham Festival meeting; a further two were later destroyed as a result of injuries sustained at this meeting (Horseracing Regulatory Authority, 2006)
- In March 2007 two horses were fatally injured during the Cheltenham Festival meeting
- In March 2008 one horse was fatally injured during the Cheltenham Festival meeting

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

- In 2006 one horse was fatally injured in the Grand National
- The condition of a faller in the 2007 National deteriorated several days after the race and he was destroyed
- In 2008 one horse was fatally injured in the Grand National
- Fatalities in this single race are not uncommon
- There is approximately a seven fold greater risk of death for horses starting a steeplechase than a flat race

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

- In the UK between 1990 and 1999:

Average death rate- Flat- 0.1 per 100 starts

Average death rate- Hurdle- 0.52 per 100 starts

(Wood *et al.* 2000, cited in Pinchbeck *et al.* 2003)

Average death rate- Steeplechase- 0.71 per 100 starts

(Wood *et al.* 2000, cited in Pinchbeck *et al.* 2004)

- This means that, on average:

For 1000 horses starting a flat race, one will die

For 1000 horses starting a hurdle race, five will die

For 1000 horses starting a steeplechase, seven will die

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

- Thus, in a meeting with around 500 starts, such as the Cheltenham festival, perhaps we can **expect** fatalities
- There is an industry-wide understanding that racecourse fatalities do nothing to promote the image of the industry with the general public
- There is an emphasis on research investigating the reasons for injury and fatality, and a drive to reduce the incidence of these events

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

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- The racing industry is funding multiple veterinary research projects, including investigation of the effect of ground conditions on the potential for injury, risk-factors associated with lower limb fractures and research into bone structure, vitality and repair
- The British Horseracing Authority record details of all falls and injuries on British racecourses, producing a database which permits analysis of injury data to help identify factors contributing to the risk of injury
- There have been changes to fence design and ground preparation, the latter aimed at reducing the numbers of meetings held on firm or heavy ground

(British Horseracing Authority, Undated)

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

- In the last five years, despite a substantial increase in the number of runners, the average number of fatalities in a year has decreased

(British Horseracing Authority, Undated)

- This is a very valid animal welfare/research-based approach aimed at reducing the risk
- The British Horseracing Authority is engaging with issues of equine welfare in a commendable manner

Hurdling and Steeplechasing

Consider...

- Perhaps having horses jumping large obstacles at speed carries an inherently higher risk of fatal or serious injury than many other equestrian sports (just as skiing is more inherently dangerous than playing golf)

Welfare and Ethics

- **If this is the case:**

We cannot eliminate **all** risk to the horse,
but...

What **level of risk** is ethically acceptable?

- **Being controversial...**

Is it ethically acceptable to have a race
meeting where we can **expect** fatalities?

- This is **not** an animal rights approach but a
valid area for ethical debate

References

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