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GREATNESS AND GOODNESS: BARBARO AND HIS LEGACY, BY ALEX BROWN.
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HORSE SLAUGHTER

Christine Picavet is an equine artist. Christine also used to be an exercise rider, at one time riding horses for Hall of Fame trainer Charlie Whittingham. Christine knew both Exceller and Ferdinand and has vivid memories of both champions.

“Exceller was an elegant horse who was by one of my favorite stallions, Vaguely Noble,” said Picavet. “I had the pleasure of riding Exceller after he arrived from France and into the barn of Hall of Fame trainer, Charles Whittingham. He was playful but gentle to be around. Exceller was easy to ride and also brave because he kept on winning despite some injuries towards the end of his racing career.”

“I painted Exceller for his owner, Nelson Bunker Hunt,” she continued. “My watercolor was featured on the cover of the *Blood-Horse*—December 4, 1978 issue. I found out that Exceller had been slaughtered in Sweden from Mike Mullaney, who worked for the *Daily Racing Form* and was writing a story about my artwork. I was so shocked by the news that I could not complete the interview for a couple of days.”

Sadly, her experience with Exceller was doomed to be repeated.

“I was also very fond of, and impressed by, Ferdinand,” said Picavet. “I visited him at his barn frequently and followed his exploits. He was tall, gorgeous, and very kind, despite being by Nijinsky. Kindness must have come from his dam, 1987 Broodmare of the Year Banja Luka. I had the pleasure of being the regular rider of Ferdinand’s older stakes-winning half sister, Donna Inez. She was so tiny and dainty compared to ‘Ferdi,’ but just as kind.” The artist added, “I had the honor of painting Ferdinand, winning the Hollywood Gold Cup over Alysheba, as a commission from owner Howard B. Keck for Charles Whittingham’s seventieth birthday.”

Ferdinand won the 1986 Kentucky Derby. It was the first Kentucky Derby win for Whittingham. His jockey, Willie Shoemaker, became the oldest jockey to win the Kentucky Derby with this victory. It was a terrific win for the old guard of horse racing. The following year, Ferdinand won the Breeders’ Cup Classic to cap off a season that earned him Horse of the Year honors. In the Breeders’ Cup Classic, Ferdinand defeated the reigning Kentucky Derby winner, Alysheba. Ferdinand was a Kentucky Derby winner who defeated another Derby winner.

In 1994, after a poor stud career in the United States, Ferdinand was exported to Japan to stand at stud. In 2002, still unsuccessful as a stallion, Ferdinand was disposed of—presumably sold for his meat.

Exceller won major stakes races in Europe and North America, and completed the unique feat of defeating two Triple Crown winners in one race (Seattle Slew and Affirmed in the 1978 Jockey Club Gold Cup). Exceller was also trained by Charlie Whittingham. In April 1997, he was sold for slaughter in Sweden at the request of his owner at the time. His caregiver, Ann Pagmer, had to make an appointment at the slaughter house, and take him over there herself. It was, no doubt, a harrowing experience for both.

The news of the stories that Exceller and Ferdinand had been slaughtered was part of the inspiration for a small group of horsemen to become directly involved in the horse slaughter issue and lobby Congress for the passage of anti-slaughter legislation. In 2006, owners Debby Oxley and Staci Hancock worked with Congressman Ed Whitfield and his wife Connie to develop a marketing campaign designed to exploit the timing of the Triple Crown. The anti-slaughter campaign included sending a letter imploring passage of the anti-slaughter bill, signed by the connections of recent Kentucky Derby winners, along with a red rose, which is synonymous with the Kentucky Derby. These packages were sent to all congressional representatives in order to encourage them to push the current bill to be released from committee so it could be considered for a floor vote. As part of the process of obtaining signatures for the letter, Staci Hancock contacted Gretchen Jackson. It was this conversation that triggered Mrs. Jackson’s involvement in the horse slaughter issue, resulting in the support of the issue from Fans of Barbaro, and in turn, my focus on the topic of horse slaughter.

While I was galloping at Sam Houston Race Park for Steve Asmussen during the winter of 2007–2008, I met with Julie Caramante, a Houston-based horse advocate. From this initial meeting was born the Americans Against Horse Slaughter two-

day lobbying event, held in Washington D.C. in March 2008. It was the largest lobbying event in the short history of the horse slaughter movement. More than a hundred advocates attended, many of whom were FOBs lobbying their government for the first time.

I remained in the employ of Steve Asmussen when I moved to Woodbine, in Toronto, Canada, in the spring of 2008, and spent much of that year, and the following, attending the OLEX kill auction in Kitchener, Ontario, each Tuesday. My purpose for attending this auction was to gain a better understanding of the types of horses that the kill buyers purchased for slaughter, and the prices that they would pay. I was also able to provide some reporting of my visits, creating a little more transparency to this aspect of the horse industry. I had previously spent some time attending the New Holland Auction in Pennsylvania, which is also attended by kill buyers.

THE ISSUE

My understanding of horse slaughter has evolved over time. Prior to getting directly involved in the issue in 2006, I think I was like many horsemen. I knew that horse slaughter existed, and I assumed that it was necessary and hoped that it was humane. I would hear, from time to time, from animal rights interests that said it was wrong and inhumane, but they were the same people who were also trying to end the sport within which I worked. They used emotionally-charged rhetoric that I assumed exaggerated circumstances, much like they did when targeting the sport of horse racing. Essentially, their viewpoint did not carry much credibility. Horsemen were more likely to listen to those who advocated for the need for horse slaughter, which included some of our own industry leadership and veterinary organizations.

My initial experiences in running this project and learning more about horse slaughter convinced me to change my viewpoint swiftly. Horse slaughter is wrong; it is inhumane and unnecessary. Horses deserve much better after the service that they have provided us over many millennia. While that viewpoint still forms a basis for my understanding of the issue, prior to attending the Americans Against Horse Slaughter lobbying event in March 2008, I determined I needed to have a better understanding of the entire issue. I conducted more research. After the March 2008 event, I headed up to Toronto, Canada. Part of the reason why I chose to go to Canada was because it is where a number of U.S. horses were being exported for slaughter. Since Steve Asmussen was setting up his first string at Woodbine, it was a great opportunity for me. I dedicated a lot of time that summer to doing more research and understanding horse slaughter from the bottom up.

I now believe that I understand the issue, and recognize the way in which we can end horse slaughter. It would require two key efforts. First, horsemen need to want to end horse slaughter, and secondly, the argument for ending horse slaughter needs to center on whether a horse is a food animal or a non-food animal.

MY RATIONALE

Horse slaughter has received much more coverage in recent years, first because of the deaths of Exceller and Ferdinand, and later, due to the groundswell of interest from Fans of Barbaro, which supported ongoing anti-slaughter efforts.

Legislation has been developed in Washington D.C. for more than ten years now, pioneered by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) in 2001. Unfortunately, there really have been no major successes at the federal level, with bills either getting held up in various committees, or going to the floor for a vote when it became too late in the year for anything to happen. At the state level there have been successes, and the last U.S.-based slaughter plants, in Illinois and Texas, were shuttered in 2007. Sadly, our horses are now simply shipped across the borders in greater numbers to Canada and Mexico for slaughter. Approximately the same number of horses are being slaughtered on a yearly basis; the location of slaughter has simply shifted.

Many of the arguments proposed to end horse slaughter are emotional ones, and as such, are debatable. The anti-slaughter movement will state that horse slaughter is inhumane, and will point to YouTube video evidence which supports this. The pro-slaughter side will argue that not only is slaughter humane—they prefer to label it “horse processing”—but it is also necessary to rid us of excess horses that would simply be left to starve, which in itself is inhumane. Anti-slaughter advocates will argue that there are no excess horses; slaughter is a demand-driven business. We slaughter only the numbers demanded by our customers in European and Asian markets. Kill buyers and slaughterhouses simply represent one target audience within the horse industry. Anti-slaughter advocates will also note that abuse and neglect occurs whether slaughter numbers increase or decrease. One number does not affect the other. They will also argue that replacing one evil (abuse and neglect) with another (slaughter) is not acceptable. Essentially, they believe in responsible ownership of the horse, which includes planning for a humane end of life.

As a horseman, I came to believe that horse slaughter is inhumane; but then again we really do not like death, and any kind of animal slaughter is going to be visually repugnant. Try watching cattle being slaughtered on YouTube. Is it a double standard to object to horse slaughter, yet not object to other livestock slaughter? Anti-slaughter advocates will note that there is a distinction. Horses are flight animals and have not been bred specifically for the slaughter pipeline, and therefore are less docile. Because they are flight animals, they sense and react to fear more readily. They are harder to kill because their longer necks make the kill process less accurate. It seems a sensible argument, but one left open to debate. Do we really know that cows do not sense fear?

If it is the case that all slaughter is inhumane, then only those who have a vegan agenda can truly argue against the inhumanity of horse slaughter. And the pro-slaughter people will argue that the anti-slaughter movement is just that—a vegan-led agenda that wants to end all livestock slaughter. Clearly, this is a complicated issue, but trying to end horse slaughter solely based on the humanity of the practice will always be a challenge.

This book has addressed the horse's role in human history, and highlighted specific horses that have proven truly inspirational. The deaths of champions such as Ferdinand and Exceller are proof that racetrack success does not guarantee a horse a fate better than slaughter.

No other animal has played such an important role for humans, and no other animal has proven so inspirational. Should this then safeguard our horses from slaughter? Does this provide a necessary distinction for horses from other livestock? Not so, if you ask those who are pro-slaughter. Livestock is livestock and should be treated as such. The debate remains an emotional one.

There is, however, one argument that is neither emotional nor debatable.

Is the horse a food animal?

Is the horse bred for the food chain, or is it bred for other purposes? For the most part (there are a few exceptions), the horse is bred for recreational, sport, and work purposes. As a result, a horse will receive drugs over its lifetime that may not be allowable for animals intended for the food chain. One such drug is phenylbutazone (bute). Horses are administered bute much like humans take aspirin. Both the Food and Drug Agency (FDA) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) have banned bute from horses for slaughter. The CFIA rules are in place to appease the European Union, which is a major customer of our horse meat. Essentially, a horse that has received bute *at any time in its life* is not viable for slaughter.

We know that racehorses are administered bute, while in training, for a variety of reasons. In 2009, 99 percent of starters in California (7,391 out of 7,443) were pre-raced on bute (according to the *Daily Racing Form*). California is one of only a few states to publish the pre-race information, but it can be considered a reasonable proxy for other racing jurisdictions in the United States. Given that pre-racing is only one event during which a horse might receive bute, it is fair to assume that pretty much every racehorse in the United States has received the drug at some point in its life. Racehorses are simply not eligible for slaughter under current rules; this argument is neither debatable nor emotional.

Racehorses are not the only equines that are given bute; it is a fair assumption that most sport, recreational, and work horses have received the drug at some point in their lives. There is no safeguard in place ensuring the meat producers that this is not the case. From a food safety standpoint, it is important to retain the distinction between a food animal and a non-food animal. The horse appears to be the only animal in a gray area.

Beginning in July 2010, in response to growing pressure from the European Union, a horse shipped to slaughter from North America has to be accompanied by an Equine Identification Document (EID). This form illustrates proof that the horse has been drug free for the prior six months. The form is signed by the prior owner, as the horse is being sold at auction, or directly to the kill buyer. Horses without these forms do not sell for the same price to kill buyers, who would then need to hold the horses for up to six months in order to satisfy this new requirement. This reflects the European Union's concern that horse meat coming from North America is drug free; however, the form does not make allowances for permanently banned drugs like bute.

This is an ongoing issue, but it seems clear that the European Union is becoming more concerned with the viability of horse meat coming from North America, where liberal use of drugs is more acceptable in horse sports. It is clear that most of our horses are not eligible for slaughter under current rules.