



Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions



Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Table of Contents

1. Presenters
2. Opening Statement
10. Veterinarian Intervention
11. Trainers' & Owners' Inexperience
12. Racetrack Surface
13. Rule Violations
14. Purse to Claiming Price Ratio
15. Year Round Racing
16. Breeding and Genetics
17. Jockey Performance
18. 2017-2020 National & Mid-Atlantic Fatality Comparison
19. Footnotes

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Racetrack Fatalities Workshop

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Parx Racetrack

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Preface

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, Stakeholders and Fellow Horsemen. I am Michael Ballezzi Executive Director of the PTHA. I am here this morning with my 1st Vice President, and member of Parx Hall of Fame, Dr. Steve Appel, PTHA Trainer Director Kate Demasi, first woman member of Parx Hall of Fame and my assistant, Lauren Young.

MR. CHAIRMAN:

In our sport, fatalities are to be expected. Admittedly, one fatality is one too many but the reality is fatalities will occur. When they do, it is the industry stakeholder's responsibility to identify causes and find solutions.

We have identified ten potential causes for racing fatalities. Likewise we have outlined each causation and provide possible solutions. They are: lack of timely Veterinarian Intervention, Trainer and Owner Inexperience, Hidden Trainership, Racetrack Surface, Track Condition, Rule Violations, Purse to Claiming Price Ratio, Year Round Racing, Breeding & Genetics and Jockey Performance. For example, track condition may be a potential cause for a fatal injury. The solution we present would be hiring experienced personnel who utilize updated equipment while

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

performing timely maintenance.

The time is long overdue that we confront the inescapable issue of horse racing fatalities with its impact on our industry and the public at large. I hope this small attempt to confront a larger issue is met with the will to get the job done and with the open-mindedness that is required to address racetrack fatalities.

I would like to open the discussion by addressing one of the many issues we have identified. That is: Trainer and Owner inexperience.

Nothing is more constructive than experience and nothing more detrimental than inexperience; so it is with a horse trainer. Experience takes time to acquire and in the case of a horse trainer, time is better to be spent as an assistant for a minimum of two (2) years where they learn their trade from an experienced veteran trainer. Learning their trade for several years will afford them the opportunity to eventually sit for a trainer's test. After acquiring a Trainer License, a trainer should continue gaining experience and knowledge by having to participate in a minimum of four

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

hours annually of continuing education in a certified program, such as Horsemen U. To assist in complying with this regulation, a website to meet the Continuing Education (CE) needs of trainers and assistant trainers has been established. The website, Horsemen U, provides CE courses and, upon completion of a webinar and a brief quiz, a Certificate of Completion with the number of CE hours earned for each course.

We invite you to go to the website, www.HorsemenU.com, register for an account and browse the courses available on the site. Trainers and assistant trainers can take the required hours of CE and store their Certificates all in one place, in the event they need documentation of compliance with the Continuing Education regulation.

At present, Pennsylvania is not part of this program. The PTHA urges the Commission to adopt this important Continuing Education Program. The newer owners coming into the industry often are looking for quicker action and get involved through claiming. Many of these new owners are unfamiliar with the injuries that are associated with the thoroughbred racehorse. Owners need to be educated as well as trainers in the need for diagnostics when needed and should have the willingness to be proactive to help prevent a fatal injury.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

There are many rules that regulate racing: medication rules, behavior rules, licensing rules, etc. and the body that is charged with regulating these rules is the Pennsylvania State Horseracing Commission. The Commission has come a long way in preventing rule violations which in many cases would have caused serious racing injuries by adopting policies such as permitting out of competition testing and enforcing multiple medication violations (MMV).

The Commission can advance further prevention of rule violations by requiring all horses to be microchipped, which will allow ease of identification at the stable gate before entering or exiting the racetrack. For example, a horse that is entered to run to race is not permitted to leave the grounds 72 hours prior to the race. The practice now is that the horse can leave the grounds by simply identifying him verbally. They do not check the tattoo or foal papers for markings which can lead to the horse leaving the grounds illegally by intentionally being misidentified. However, the PTHA has entered into a partnership with the Jockey Club wherein the Jockey Club has provided free microchips and the PTHA has inserted them free of charge. At present, approximately 90% of the horses at Parx are

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

microchipped but the policy at Parx is not to scan the horses as they enter or leave the stable gate. The solution is for Parx management to utilize the microchip identification process which is already in place.

The Pennsylvania Racing Commission would urge all industry stakeholders and participants to vigilantly monitor and report incidents of illegal behavior to the appropriate authorities. The PTHA encourages the Commission to establish an Integrity Hotline to leave an anonymous and confidential message. It is important that wrongdoing on the backside be reported to the proper authorities. An anonymous hotline would offer an opportunity for an individual to come forward and report wrongdoing and not be worried about negative repercussions for doing the right thing.

There is a real concern regarding lack of timely trainer notification of the need for veterinarian intervention. When we speak of veterinarian intervention we are speaking of diagnostics: radiographs, ultrasounds, etc. There are three potential reasons we believe that veterinarian intervention is an issue.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

A horse's injury is so subtle that many inexperienced trainers miss it completely. Economics: trainer and/or owner cannot afford or is not willing to pay for the cost of diagnostics.

Trainers simply do not want to know the extent of the injury.

However, better veterinarian oversight can forewarn of pending serious injury and the need for diagnostic intervention. For example, the presence of a Commission Veterinarian during training hours, observing a horse's performance, can alert the trainer that he should provide early intervention.

Admittedly, the most difficult time to race is in the winter. Track surface is difficult to maintain in a consistent manner, especially during the winter months when freezing and thawing causes its own unique problems. Horsemen are apt in the winter months to reduce the number of horses in their care, necessitating the need for a place for these horses. Thus, as a result of this need for aftercare, Turning for Home was founded by the PTHA at Parx racing in 2008 with the philosophy "to leave no horse behind." Turning for Home has a remarkable record to date of placing into

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

aftercare and tracking over 3,300 horses. Turning for Home remains a leader in racetrack aftercare.

Unfortunately, year round racing has its share of fatalities. Admittedly, one fatality is one too many but the reality is that fatalities will occur. In an attempt to understand the whys and wherefores of fatalities at Parx, the Pennsylvania State Horse Racing Commission has brought together PTHA and Parx management to forming the Parx Mortality Review Board. The Board members are: the Parx Racing Secretary, the PTHA Executive Director, the Commission vet, the Track Superintendent and the Track Safety Officer. This Board is charged with the responsibility to investigate all racing fatalities by holding informal fact-finding hearings which include questioning trainers, grooms, riders and veterinarians. The Board then compiles a report which includes findings of facts and conclusions. The report is then reviewed for any possible conditions that led to the fatality which should be addressed immediately.

Also, year round racing has an added effect on the health and safety of the horse. Stricter protocols to get off of the Vet's List and stricter pre-race exams can ensure that the horses that are not fit for racing will not fall through the cracks.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

In conclusion, fatalities at the racetrack have multiple causations and solutions. We have attempted to identify some of them but admittedly, we have a difficult task at hand. One thing is certain: the industry must unite and be one voice in confronting the challenges presented by dead horses on the racetrack which jeopardizes the very existence of our sport.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Lack of timely trainer notification of the need for veterinary intervention

Solutions:

- Timely diagnostic imaging
 - Radiographs, Ultrasounds, MRI, etc.
- Greater Veterinary oversight
- Veterinarian presence during training hours
- Restrictions on invasive procedures
 - Limit number of inter-articular injections

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Trainers' & Owners' inexperience
- Hidden trainership (program trainers)

Solutions:

- Continuing education for trainers and owners
 - Horsemen U
- Stricter trainer's and assistant trainer's licensing requirements
 - Work experience
 - Written tests
 - Barn tests
- Trainer Elite Program

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Racing surface (dirt, turf, synthetic)
- Track Condition (fast, sloppy, slow, etc.)

Solutions

- Continuing track maintenance
- Experienced personnel
- Updated equipment
- Weekly inspection of racing surface
- Annual inspection of base and repair of racing surfaces
- Timely cancellation of racing and training
- Track maintenance and condition committee

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Rule violations

Solutions:

- Multiple medication violations penalties (MMV)
- Utilize microchip ID at the stable gate
- Enhanced PSHRC oversight
- Out of competition testing
- Integrity hotline

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Purse to claiming price ratio

Solutions:

- Purse not to exceed 2 ½ times claiming price
- Mid-Atlantic racetracks compliance

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Year-round racing
 - Winter racing

Solutions:

- Enhanced vigilance
 - Weather conditions
 - Track maintenance
- Horsemen's Aftercare Programs
 - Turning for Home
- Stricter protocols to get off Vet's List
- Stricter pre-race exams
- Parx Mortality Review Board
- Mid-Atlantic tracks racing circuit

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Breeding and Genetics

Solutions:

- Breed the best physically sound to the best physically sound
- Breeder soundness examinations
- Less emphasis on breeding purely for speed

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Causes:

- Jockey performance
 - Rider safety

Solutions:

- Stricter Steward oversight
- Clear interpretation of riding infractions
- Veteran jockey mentorship

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

National and Mid-Atlantic Fatality Comparison 2017-2020

	2020			2019			2018			2017	
	Fat/1K	Rank		Fat/1K	Rank		Fat/1K	Rank		Fat/1K	Rank
DE	0.72	1		2.54	7		2.1	4		3.11	6
MD	1.72	6		1.96	3		1.96	3		1.55	2
NJ	1.36	3		2.1	6		2.64	5		0.24	1
NY	1.6	5		1.21	2		1.29	1		1.72	3
PA	1.13	2		2.06	5		1.39	2		1.89	4
VA	4.12	7		0	1		n/a			n/a	
WV	1.38	4		2	4		2.79	6		2.45	5
Parx	1.09			2.6			n/a			n/a	
Nat.	1.41			1.53			1.68			1.61	

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Page #3

Footnotes

Causes:

Lack of timely trainer notification of the need for veterinarian intervention

Narrative:

There are three potential reasons why we believe that veterinarian intervention, that is the use of diagnostics, radiographs, ultrasounds, etc., are not utilized.

1. Horse's injury is so subtle that any inexperienced trainer misses it completely.
2. Economics: trainer cannot afford or is not willing to pay for the cost of diagnostics.
3. Trainers simply do not want to know the extent of the injury

However, better veterinarian oversight can forewarn of pending serious injury and the need for diagnostic intervention. For example, the presence of a Commission veterinarian during training hours observing a horse's performance can alert the trainer that he should provide early intervention.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Footnotes

Page #4

Causes:

Trainers' and owners' inexperience

Narrative:

Admittedly, nothing is more constructive than experience and nothing more detrimental than inexperience; so it is with a horse trainer. Experience takes time to acquire and in the case of a horse trainer, time is better to be spent as an assistant where they learn their trade from an experienced veteran trainer. Learning their trade for several years will afford them the opportunity to eventually sit for a trainer's test. Experience gained in this manner is beneficial to horse and trainer year's experience working as an assistant trainer full time. After getting licensed, a trainer should continue gaining experience and knowledge by having to participate in a minimum of four hours of continuing education in a certified program, such as Horsemen U.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Footnotes

Page #5

Causes:

Racetrack surface and track condition

Narrative:

Track condition may be a cause for a potential fatal injury. An example of a solution would be experienced personnel utilizing updated equipment and by performing timely maintenance.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Page #6

Footnotes

Causes:

Rule violations

Narrative:

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Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Footnotes

Page #7

Causes:

Purse to claiming price ratio

Narrative:

Purse to claiming price ratio refers to the multiple of the claiming price to the purse. For example, if a horse runs for a \$10,000 claiming price, applying a multiple of 2 ½ times would be a maximum purse of \$25,000. By maintaining a purse higher than 2 ½ times the claiming price incentivizes over-racing cheaper, unsound horses to earn disproportionately higher purses.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Page #8

Footnotes

Causes:

Year round racing; winter racing

Narrative:

Admittedly, the most difficult time to race is in the winter. Track surface is difficult to maintain in a consistent manner, especially during the winter months when freezing and thawing causes its own unique problems. Horsemen are apt in the winter months to reduce the number of horses in their care, necessitating the need for a place for these horses. Thus, as a result of this need for aftercare, Turning for Home was founded at Parx. Unfortunately, year round racing has its share of fatalities. Admittedly, one fatality is one too many but the reality is that fatalities will occur. In an attempt to understand the whys and wherefores of fatalities at Parx, the PTHA and Parx management have come together and have formed the Parx Mortality Review Board. The Board members are the Parx Racing Secretary, the PTHA Executive Director, the Commission vet, the Track Superintendent and the Track Safety Officer. This Board is charged with the responsibility to investigate all racing fatalities by holding informal fact-finding hearings which includes questioning trainers, grooms, riders and veterinarians. The Board then compiles a report which includes findings of facts and conclusions. The report is then reviewed for any possible conditions that led to the fatality which should be addressed immediately.

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Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Footnotes

Page # 9

Causes:

Breeding and Genetics

Narrative:

Did you ever see a Kentucky Derby winning stallion not become a stud? The Kentucky Derby winner could be crooked, three-legged lame and blind and breeders would still breed to him. Therein lies the problem: breeding unsoundness into the bloodlines. Likewise, breeding for speed above all other traits contributes greatly to the weakening of the breed.

In addition, lucrative 2yo racing encourages breeding for precociousness and “rushing” immature, growing horses to the races.

Racetrack Fatalities: Causes and Solutions

Footnotes

Page #10

Causes:

Jockey performance and rider safety

Narrative:

Race riding is a dangerous occupation. It is even more dangerous with a careless rider. Careless riding leads to accidents which create the opportunity for fatalities. Stricter Steward oversight with clear interpretation of riding infractions would greatly assist veteran and apprentice alike by providing a safer racing scenario benefitting both horse and rider.

Veteran jockey mentorship would be beneficial by providing apprentice jockeys with the passing on of knowledge, experience and techniques necessary to maneuver in the dangerous world of horse racing.