

# They Just Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To

*The lack of soundness amongst today's Thoroughbreds is a major cause for concern in the breeding and racing industry.*

by **JW EQUINE**

When it comes to the subject of soundness in racehorses, it seems that everyone has an opinion. This scribe attended half a dozen seminars and listened to at least 50 presentations from August 2001 to September 2002, that covered various facets of Thoroughbred breeding and racing and the most common concern, hands down, was the lack of soundness in today's Thoroughbred.

Professionals around the world are expressing concern about what they see as a real problem, but most are stumped when it comes to providing a solution. Some blame the breeders, some blame the trainers, some blame the marketplace, some blame veterinarians, some blame track surfaces, and some blame the emphasis on speed, speed, speed.

Dan Rosenberg, president of Three Chimneys in Midway, Kentucky, and part of that farm's team since 1978, carries a lot of credence when he expresses his views. As a past-president of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Farm Managers' Club and their Manager of the Year in 1992, a member of the advisory board of the Colorado State University

contributors to the problem. People are not "developing a racehorse—they're looking for a quick return. We're not breeding for future generations [and] we're just not breeding to produce broodmares."

Rosenberg may have put his finger on why this is becoming a popular topic of discussion when he said, "Soundness is going to be more and more important as there's less and less of it. That's why we went after Silver Charm—he showed some soundness."

Others associated with breeding farms and stallion stations in the U.S. had similar comments. Jim Plemmons of Old Frankfort Stud sees the industry as being driven by pin-hookers and, as a result, has seen Thoroughbreds start to resemble Quarter Horses. Nathan Fox, founder of Warfare Farm, wishes that the word "fashionable" could be removed from the breeders' handbook, and Peter Kirwan of Highland Farms echoed this sentiment by saying that, "Commercial is a horrible word." When making bloodstock selections, California's Hal Oliver (Oliver Bloodstock Services) lists soundness as his number one criteria in mares, and his number two criteria, after racing ability, in choosing stallions.

years to get back to good-boned horses. When a horse breaks down, it is a very scary feeling."

Aware of the popular bloodlines today and the duplication of certain names in today's racehorses, he reflects on the days when he was riding the offspring of one of those dominant influences. "The Native Dancers were not sound." He should know—he rode many of them, including two of the most famous ones, Natalma (dam of Northern Dancer) and Dancer's Image (the only horse to ever be disqualified from a win in the Kentucky Derby).

Ian Balding, trainer for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, has thousands of winners to his credit including European champion, Mill Reef. As of late, Balding has written and spoken internationally on the subject of frailty in the racehorse, a topic he feels has several causes. Shouldering some of the blame, Balding points to trainers and changes in training methods as part of the problem. He also points the finger at veterinarians, for both performing an increasing number of corrective surgeries that allow yearlings to pass through sales as well as patching up unsound horses so that they can continue to race. When it comes to production, he sees that breeding for more and more speed and breeding commercially, without consideration for soundness, as major concerns. "Please do not breed from unsound mares, and please remember the stallion that has won over a mile-and-a-half."

James R. Rooney, DVM, an inductee in the International Equine Veterinarians Hall of Fame, has long been outspoken on soundness issues. He conducted research at the Gluck

---

*"We're not breeding for future generations [and] we're just not breeding to produce broodmares."*  
—Dan Rosenberg, Three Chimneys

---

Orthopedic Research Foundation, and a recipient of the Ambassador of Racing Award, Rosenberg has knowledge of the subject from a number of angles. He feels that the emphasis on precocious speed along with more interest in dirt and less in turf is a trend that we are following at "our own peril," and he cites changes in breeding and racing habits as

Robert Ussery brings a slightly different slant to the mix, that of the person on top. When he retired from racing, he was the sport's fifth-leading jockey by money won. He was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame in 1980. His comments cause him to shake his head. "Have you seen how fine those horses are!?! It will take 40

**Continued on next page**

## **JW EQUINE Continued**

Equine Research Center at the University of Kentucky for over 25 years and has written books on lameness, making him a highly respected expert.

---

*“That they should be retired may well be the case, but should that animal be put to stud service when the predisposing cause of the lameness is conformational?”*

*Obviously not.”*

—The Lame Horse by James R. Rooney, DVM

---

His pull-no-punches style is evident in the following excerpt from his publication *The Lame Horse*. “The conformation of a horse is largely a function of its genetic make-up. If you breed horses that are back-on-the-knee, you will get offspring that are back-on-the-knee. If you want to avoid carpal arthrosis (destruction of the cartilage in the knee that can lead to chips and/or catastrophic breakdowns), do not start with a predisposing conformation, either for your own breeding or someone else’s. Secondly, train the horse thoroughly and well, not only for speed but also for muscle strength and endurance.

“There has been for a long time now a distressing tendency in the racing business, at least, to retire young horses to stud when they suffer a lameness. That they should be retired may well be the case, but should that animal be put to stud service when the predisposing cause of the lameness is conformational? Obviously not. One understands the economics involved but, even so, in the long-term interests of the industry, factors directly related to lameness should

to the best to get the best. Best, however, is not speed and immediate money winnings alone. It is the ability to stand up under training and race over time, and to transmit that ability to the next generation.”

Dr. Bill Moyer, head of the Department of Large Animal Medicine and Surgery as well as a professor of Equine Sports Medicine at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M, has been a licensed veterinarian for 33 years and was a farrier before that.

He sees the Thoroughbred as a “high-speed athlete,” and has seen the number of injuries in short careers increase. “In

activity for health and they sure don’t get it these days. Bone fatigues at a rate similar to the rate of fatigue in muscle when a horse has not been working for a week or so. The single most common cause of breakdown injury is the disruption of the suspensory apparatus.” That includes torn suspensory ligaments and fractured sesamoids, both of which appear together with regularity. As to the future, he laments, “The reality is it probably won’t improve—it will only get worse.”

He also brings up an interesting point regarding charges leveled at advances in veterinary science that allow for repairs that were not previously possible. Procedures are never performed without them being requested and paid for by someone associated with the horse, which implies approval from another party, namely the one responsible for the horse.

CTBA Director Dr. Dennis M. Meagher DVM, a Professor Emeritus from UC Davis and a practicing veterinarian specializing in lameness and

---

*“Most horses are raised to be sold, not to be athletes. . . . The reality is it probably won’t improve—it will only get worse.”*

—Dr. Bill Moyer,

College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A & M

---

my observation, the major reason is that the horse has become more and more like a 1200-pound poodle. We have moved them from the environment they evolved in, and thrived in, to the environment we’ve required them to live in. Most horses are raised to be sold, not to be athletes. They are brought up in an environment that doesn’t present any challenges what-

surgery, agrees with that last point. “People like to point fingers, but the issue of medication is not solely a veterinarian’s responsibility. The owner gets the bills and the trainer has to okay any medication before the veterinarian administers it. Owners have to stand up and say, ‘This is unacceptable.’ If the trainer doesn’t tell them, then it’s time to have a discussion with that trainer or even move to another one.”

Regarding the soundness issue, he states, “It is a complex issue—everything has changed so much. Horses are managed differently now. We’re not comparing two populations under the same conditions.”

Dr. Meagher highlighted a few different areas of concern, including a

---

*“It is a balancing act between fashionable, those welcome in the commercial market, and those that are correct and have a tendency to stay sound.”*

—CTBA Director Dennis M. Meagher, DVM

---

not be perpetuated. More than a few fast stallions that break down should be promptly castrated!

“It is an old saying to breed the best

soever. There’s no integration with others and no stresses that make them tougher. Of all the mammals we know about, the horse is most dependent on physical

**Continued on next page**

## JW EQUINE Continued

couple not previously mentioned. "Rarely is the size and quality of the foot considered. The size and quality of the Thoroughbred hoof has decreased in the last 45 years. I think that it has a significant effect—a small base plays a role in other lameness problems." He cited the Quarter Horse as an example. "They had to take a look at the problems with horses with small feet and make changes. I see the potential for improvement in Thoroughbreds also."

He also believes that the market will eventually change how we select our breeding stock. . .eventually. "Clearly the selection of breeding stock is not limited—people are free to breed to whatever they like. Using breeding animals with conformational defects will make matters worse. It's self-perpetuating. Selecting breeding stock for conformation under the current situation? How is that possible when speed pays the bills? The majority of horses are bred to be sold. It is recognized that big, growthy individuals may not perform well as 2-year-olds, but the market wants big yearlings and fast 2-year-olds-in-training. The market doesn't encourage people to produce horses that will last, go a distance, or race on turf. Raising horses is different now—the economics of it are a lot different. Buyers are looking for a quick return. There is a tremendous amount of pressure for (fast) times at 2-year-olds-in-training sales."

In addition, Meagher believes that "year-round racing has played a part when it comes to longevity, because horses aren't getting a break." He thinks that giving a horse a three-month break once a year is viewed as too costly when the expense of retraining is considered, but questions whether it might be more lucrative for a horse to run well for six months and last longer, than to have "a horse run on and off for a year. People are often reluctant to rest the horse. They make economic decisions, saying they can't afford to. I'd like to see horses given a break instead of being kept in continual training."

This may be something that is gaining recognition with trainers. After his

win with Vindication in the 2002 Breeders' Cup Juvenile, Bob Baffert said, "I'm learning not to run 2-year-olds too often. I wish I had learned that with some of my earlier horses."

Regarding selection, Meagher continued, "There needs to be more emphasis on breeding stock and on the size and shape of the hoof, but it's not going to happen any time soon. We aren't going to return to the time when people raised horses on their own farms, but people will become more selective of their breeding stock, based on eco-

nomics. Selection is going to get tougher, particularly for conformation. Sires that were successful as young horses but didn't last? I don't think that is going to change—they will be successful at stud despite short careers due to unsoundness. I don't know whether the mare population is more unsound than it used to be, but it has the potential for change. People are becoming more conscious in the selection of their stock, and are more critical of unsound mares.

**Continued on next page**

## Mojave Training Center

*Specializing in Starting Young Horses*



- 1-Mile Track
- Great Feeding Program
- Boarders receive free teeth floating & feet trimming
- Boarding \$6 Day
- Breaking/Training \$20 Day
- Free shipping to our ranch\*  
\*90 days of training required

*90 Miles from Pomona*

**BYRON ALLEN**

20800 Halstead Rd. • Hinkley, CA 92347 • (760) 253-3611

## JW EQUINE Continued

It is a balancing act between fashionable, those welcome in the commercial market, and those that are correct and have a tendency to stay sound."

Other points that he mentions, include toe grabs and the number of fast workouts recorded per month, both matters that have been tackled by U.C. Davis studies in the past. "Toe grabs have a detrimental effect on racehorses, and I think that will be proven again with the current study. People

are slow to accept change. It is a lot of effort to get people to accept it, especially in the racing industry. Horses that had more fast furlongs per month showed an increase of catastrophic injury. I believe it may also be cumulative over many months."

The good news is that Meagher says that the number of catastrophic injuries in California is down, and he offers two reasons for that—early diagnosis of stress fractures and being more critical in pre-race inspections.

Tony Morris has been chronicling

racing from his base in England since 1963, and is a keen observer of the sport. "There can be no doubt that the Thoroughbred has become less sound in recent generations. Trainers with long experience in the profession know that horses in their care now cannot take the work that was customary of their forebears of 30 years ago, and statistics from racing confirm their view. Horses compete less frequently, and have shorter careers.

"There are a number of reasons for the decline and, ironically, the progress of veterinary science is surely one of the key factors. Horses who naturally lack a robust constitution can now be patched up and given running repairs sufficient to make them effective racehorses, and we admit them to the breeding population with no questions asked. This is an ideal formula for the spread and perpetuation of fragility.

"In Europe, the one breeding industry that has made significant advances in recent years is Germany and it is surely no coincidence that in that country a stallion must meet stringent criteria to obtain his opportunity to breed. He not only has to show a certain level of racing ability, but must also show that he is free of known hereditary defects. North American horsemen might care to note that a recent addition to the criteria bars any horse who has raced on medication from standing in Germany.

"Construe such regulation as an infringement of liberty and a restraint of trade, if you like, but if horsemen of other nations truly cared about the deterioration of soundness in the Thoroughbred, they would think very seriously about establishing their own licensing schemes for stallions."

So, we see that some very knowledgeable people have pointed to the problem and ventured their thoughts on the causes, but is blame the real issue? Shouldn't the question be what do we do to stop it or correct it? Too bad we can't ask the horses how they feel about being in a race they can never win—the one against the almighty dollar!



**New Location for 2003!**

***Ya Gotta See This!***  
CA's #1 Third Crop Sire by Percentage of Stakes Horses

**HOLIE**

*Criminal Type—Sunshine Always, by Arts and Letters*

An incredible 19% Stakes Horses and  
65% winners/placed  
from starters from his 1st two crops.

*A higher percentage than:*

**Valid Wager**

**Lit de Justice**

**Roar**

**Lord Carson**

**Cobra King**

**Miesque's Son**

**\$1,000**

*Second mare free when approved*



**P.B.& J. Farm**

**R. Frank Tatman, Owner/Manager**

**4733 County Road P • Orland, CA 95963 • (530) 865-8842**  
**Irrigated Pastures • Complete Mare & Foal Care • Sales Prep**



See Page on 175