

The Final Turn

By Monique S. Koehler

Racing's Good News

When Exceller, a millionaire Thoroughbred with a lasting place in racing history, was put to death in a Swedish slaughterhouse, horsemen and racing fans alike were genuinely shaken. The shocking report of Exceller's final, frightened hours was all the more heartrending because his death was so unnecessary. Despite pleas for his life from the owner of the farm where the stallion was standing, who would have taken full responsibility for him, the great horse was consigned to death.

And by the cruel manner of his death, this magnificent Thoroughbred has reminded many who should need no such reminder of racing's deep and inextricable bond with the horses who run their hearts out for our pleasure—and profit.

Exceller was a superstar on the racetrack; that a horse of his quality ended his days in a slaughterhouse made headlines. But what of all the horses whose similar deaths go unremarked? Let us honor Exceller's memory by recognizing that all racehorses deserve humane treatment always. It isn't, after all, people who make racing possible. *First comes the horse.*

For the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, the horse has always come first.

We are racing's good news.

Yet despite our successful 15-year track record, there are still many who remain unaware of the resources we offer, or that many of the measures now being proposed to create a safety net for racehorses when their track careers are over have been integral to Foundation programs and goals from our beginning in 1982.

For 15 years, the TRF has been providing lifetime care for retired Thoroughbreds at our satellite and TRF-operated farms in Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York, and now through private adoptions.

At our principal retirement farms at state correctional facilities, it's a win-win situation for both horses and people. Prison inmates and juvenile offenders who care for our retired racehorses derive emotional as well as educational benefits from TRF's pioneering, state-accredited vocational programs in horse care and management. And the horses thrive under their capable hands. Similar TRF programs in Kentucky and Florida are high on our agenda for expansion.

Well-trained TRF graduates have gone on to jobs with riding stables, horse farms, and racetracks. One former student-inmate credits the discipline and responsibility instilled by working with the horses for his decision to help others to redirect their lives; he has become a substance-abuse counselor. Another, now employed by one of Maryland's leading riding facilities, has become an accomplished equestrian, winning numerous ribbons



in hunter-jumper competitions. He is also one of our first adopters and plans to retrain TRF retiree Speedy Prankster as a hunter-jumper.

The TRF is also in the unique position to provide opportunities for veterinarians to develop treatments for horses that have suffered significant, albeit non-life-threatening, injuries. Already TRF horses are benefiting from experimental therapies provided by veterinarians who volunteer their services in order to advance the field of equine care. A TRF center open to veterinary school students for the study

of equine rehabilitation and retraining is in the planning stages.

In addition to our own steadily expanding programs, TRF's Equine Outreach program offers financial aid to the extent possible from our limited funds to horse rescue operations that share our goals and standards and to therapeutic riding programs.

As TRF grows, another aspect of equine education has become increasingly vital.

It seems that the racehorse has come to be regarded as a commodity to be bought, traded, and disposed of as if it were nothing more than a piece of equipment in the game of racing. It's not just the horses that are suffering. Racing itself is being hurt. We are convinced that only by reinstating the horse to its preeminent status will the sport regain its former glory. On the eve of his 100th birthday, racing legend Fred W. Hooper said: "Racing has turned into a numbers game...what they've got to do is educate people to the beauty of racing." We agree.

In a new initiative, the TRF will endeavor to reinforce respect for the inherent value of the racing Thoroughbred through development and distribution of an owner's manual detailing the proud history of these splendid animals and the responsibilities—and joys—of ownership.

Already TRF's private adopters receive certificates of registration for their horses with the Jockey Club's Performance Horse Registry (PHR). Adopters' PHR benefits include a five-generation pedigree for their horses and access to the past performance records of its siblings and forebears. We want to encourage in adopters an appreciation of the Thoroughbred's noble heritage and inherent worth through a knowledge of its bloodlines, family ties, and achievements.

The real tragedy of Exceller's death will be if we allow the memory of his painful death to fade from our hearts and minds while allowing practices that regularly consign countless thousands of racehorses to the slaughterhouses. The resources to prevent such suffering exist. The TRF, with our years of experience, is ideally positioned to unite Thoroughbreds in desperate need of help with the many organizations able to provide it. We stand ready to lead the way, confident of continuing support from the racing industry, whose help and endorsement has made our work possible from the start. ■

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