

## **A Safety Net for Racehorses**

**E**IGHTEEN YEARS AGO, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation was founded to offer lifetime haven to Thoroughbreds when they can no longer race. Since then, it has grown to become the nation's largest Thoroughbred rescue operation, and hundreds upon hundreds of horses whose lives were in jeopardy when their track careers came to an end have instead been given a new start in life.

“From the outset,” said founder and chairperson Monique S. Koehler, “the New York Racing Association (NYRA) has stood beside us in our conviction that Thoroughbreds deserve a future and that, through our unique vocational training programs, the horses’ future offers rewards to their caregivers as well.

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“NYRA is our most most generous supporter,” Koehler continued, “not only with direct gifts to support our efforts but by opening New York track facilities to us for fundraising events. NYRA has also been instrumental in the vital task of educating owners, trainers, jockeys, and fans to the importance of our work. We could not have come some so far without them. NYRA’s endorsement is the cornerstone of our support from the industry; their contribution to our success has been enormous.”

### **TRF’s New York Beginnings**

New York State is home to the TRF’s first retirement farm and the model for TRF facilities in Maryland, Kentucky, and Florida and for other rescue organizations as well. The pioneering program was established in 1982 in cooperation with New York’s Department of Corrections. On 50 acres at the Wallkill State Correctional Facility, inmates fenced paddocks and converted a derelict dairy barn to one for horses by lowering the floor (horses are taller than cows).

Farm manager Jim Tremper designed the TRF’s innovative “horse course,” a state-accredited curriculum in horse handling and care, basing it on courses at Cornell and New York community colleges.

And downstate, at Belmont Park, the legendary Kelso made his last public appearance, parading with Forego and John Henry to call public attention to the plight of racehorses when their racing careers are over.

The trio of champions helped to raise enough money to get the TRF up and running, and by 1984, Wallkill was ready to welcome its first horse, Promised Road.

New York racing fans may remember some of Wallkill’s more notable retired athletes: Herr Von Kaninchen, a big bay standing over 17 hands, who earned nearly half-a-million dollars in his five years at Belmont, Aqueduct, Saratoga, and the Finger Lakes; Banker’s Jet, who earned \$679,381, and was nursed back to health at Wallkill after the TRF discovered him alone and starving to death in the muddy quagmire of an upstate paddock; Crème de la Fete, a favorite who won 40 of his 151 starts, one more than John Henry.

Meanwhile, the Wallkill inmates who learn valuable vocational skills while caring for the thirty or more retirees on the farm derive emotional benefits as well. It’s a life-affirming arrangement for both horses and men

“The Wallkill farm, with its rolling hills, mountains, and panoramic vistas, can stand alongside many of the nation’s top breeding establishments,” wrote Steve Haskin in *The Daily Racing Form*. “One look at the glistening coats can attest to [how well the horses are treated]. Watching dozens of contented Thoroughbreds romping through the paddocks and seeing the look of pride on the faces of the inmates, one can’t help but be moved....”

### **Rehabilitating and Retraining Racehorses for New Careers**

In fall 1999, the Foundation opened its second New York State facility in Poughquag. Cradled in the state’s idyllic upstate pastureland, the TRF Exceller Rehabilitation and Retraining Farm prepares retired racing Thoroughbreds for adoption as pleasure horses. Under the tutelage of Michele Oren, the farm manager, the horses put behind them the lessons of the racetrack and learn, among other things, the meaning of whoa.

Racehorses are taught to run in a straight line,” said Oren. “When they arrive here, the first step is to turn them out to pasture while they learn just to be horses, then we teach them things like how to turn and to stop.”

Oren rides and retrains the ex-racers and, with the aid of a part-time assistant rider, observes them to be sure they are fully sound and have no dangerous habits. “Riding,” she believes, “is a process, not an ‘event.’ We also help their new owners to understand that when they are calm and relaxed with the horse, everyone goes home happy.”

The first horse to be adopted from the TRF Exceller Farm was Volcanic Ash, a three-year-old filly who had never known affection and was wary of any human contact. No one could get near her until a young TRF farm volunteer patiently sat with her, day after day, next to the grain bucket. Ash, who could eat only by coming close to the young woman, slowly learned to trust people. She has become a sweet-natured and loving animal, adored by her new owner.

“Once again, New York is breaking ground for TRF programs nationwide,” said TRF executive director Diana Pikulski. “The success rate for private adoptions has soared thanks to the Exceller Farm’s preparation of former racehorses for new careers as pleasure and companion horses, and similar programs are planned for other states.”

### **A Safety Net for Horses in Jeopardy**

“Providing dependable, lifetime retirement options for racehorses when their track careers come to an end is becoming an industry-wide concern,” Pikulski said. “The racing industry’s endorsement helps us to focus public attention on this need.”

As the TRF’s capacity to receive horses has grown, the organization has become increasingly proactive in its rescue efforts. As many as 20 horses have entered TRF programs in a single weekend. Especially at smaller tracks, where many racehorses end their careers as cheap claimers, the TRF is creating a safety net for horses in danger of being sent to slaughter when they can no longer race. TRF directors, volunteers, and representatives of smaller rescue organizations with limited resources, are posting notices at track backsides all over the state to let horsemen know about the TRF.

The notice reads: “Do you know a horse in need of retirement? The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation offers a fast, first-rate alternative to the auction. No horses are sold. Transfer of your horse is tax-deductible.” Contact information is provided; horsemen may call the TRF’s retirement “hot line,” 1-800-728-1660, fax 1-732-671-7538, or correspond via e-mail to: [trfinc@msn.com](mailto:trfinc@msn.com).

### **Lifetime Haven**

So long as a Thoroughbred has raced, is free of contagious or communicable disease, and has no other retirement options, the horse is assured of lifetime haven by the TRF.

The Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation is a nonprofit organization wholly supported by donations from private citizens and the racing industry. It provides lifetime homes for former racehorses at a growing network of TRF-operated and satellite farms in Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin, and through private adoptions. In addition to the New York farms at Wallkill and Poughquag, principal retirement facilities are at Blackburn Correctional Complex in Lexington, Ky., and the Florida Division’s farm at the Marion Correctional Institution in Ocala, Fla., where inmates learn vocational and life skills through their care of the horses, and at the Charles Hickey School in Baltimore, Md., where at-risk juveniles benefit from a similar program.

For more information or to make a donation, please contact the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, PMB 351, 450 Shrewsbury Plaza, Shrewsbury, NJ 07702-4332; telephone, (732) 957-0182, or on the Internet at [www.trfinc.org](http://www.trfinc.org).

— *Mary Ratcliffe*