

Harness Racing Envy

If you ever go to a gripe session about thoroughbred racing which is the *raison d'être* of most every horse racing conferences, you'd think that harness racing had it made in the shade. Everything that the lords of thoroughbred racing claim that their sport needs, harness racing already has.

Thoroughbred horses don't run often enough. Horses have to rest up weeks and occasionally months between starts. Nobody ever wins the thoroughbred triple crown; so that it limits the emergence of any superstars. All good thoroughbreds retire early. Thoroughbreds race in the afternoon when people are working and can't get to the track or a simulcasting facility. All the horses are on lasix. There's too much time between the thoroughbred races. The fact is that much of the thoroughbred racing world wants to be harness racing.

Look at the time between races. Monticello Raceway runs 12 races in 3 ½ hours. Saratoga Gaming and Raceway takes about 18 minutes between races and can complete 13 races in slightly more than 3/12 hours. Keeneland takes four hours to race nine races. On Wood Memorial Day in April, which is Aqueduct's big day of racing, it took 5 ¼ hours to run 11 races.

The average thoroughbred runner in 2005 made 6.45 starts down from 11.31 starts in 1960. Harness horses average 17 starts a year, and that figure has remained unchanged over the past several years.

Take a look at the entries at Aqueduct versus Freehold for Friday April 14, 2006. At Freehold, the median time between starts for the entrants was seven days. Only two horses (1.9% of the starters) had layoffs in excess of 20 days, and the longest time between starts was 28 days. 51.6% of the entries at Freehold planned to races on lasix. This number is very close to the average of 53.5% of starters on lasix in pari-mutuel standardbred races in the United States.

At Aqueduct, the median time between starts was 28 days. Only two horses (2.5% of the entries) had less than ten days rest. Only 17.3% of the Aqueduct entries had less than 20 days rest. 30.9% of the entries had layoffs of 40 days or longer. 94.2% of the horses – including first time starters – planned to use lasix.

Since the triple crown was inaugurated for standardbreds in the mid-1950's we've seen 10 triple crown winners in pacing, seven in trotting, and only three at the thoroughbred tracks.

Horses of the year in thoroughbred racing simply don't make many starts. Of the six thoroughbreds that have been honored in the 21st century, only Azeri (the HOY in 2002) with 24 starts raced more than 20 times in her lifetime. Besides Azeri, Saint Liam raced 20 times, Ghostzapper 10, Mineshaft 18, Point Given 13 and Tiznow 15.

By contrast, every harness horse of the year in this century started more frequently than Azeri, and Gallo Blue Chip's (HOY 2000) 133 starts are far in excess of the combined 100 starts of all the thoroughbred horses of the year. Bunny Lake's (HOY 2001) total of 93 starts is also comparable to the total number of starts of the thoroughbred horses of the year.

Just looking at these numbers may actually discount the comparative durability of the harness horse. The 21st century has seen a number of top thoroughbred three year olds leave racing early. Kentucky Derby winners Fusaichi Pegasus, Monarchos, War Emblem, and Smarty Jones made nine, 10 13, and nine starts respectively. Belmont Stakes winner Empire Maker made eight starts. Dual classic winner Afleet Alex made 12 lifetime starts. It's a long, long way from these horses to Canada's 2005 horse of the year Admirals Express with 260 plus starts and counting.

As to racing at night, this can only be viewed as a self-inflicted wound by thoroughbred industry. Worried about the threat of harness racing after World War II, thoroughbred racing's leadership lobbied against night racing. The Thoroughbred Racing Associations unanimously took a position against night racing at its tracks. According to the remarks at its 1949 convention, "The speakers agreed that night racing would cheapen the business, lead to excessive betting, particularly by those least able to afford it, cause some leading owners to quit racing and draw opposition from other sports and amusement groups." President Donald Ross of the Thoroughbred Racing Associations warned that night racing "would result in the downfall of racing."

So harness racing is everything that thoroughbred racing aspires to be. Harness racing produces champions and horses that fans can actually see and root for on a regular basis. Harness races are run at night when people can see them, and the races are run quickly. So with all these advantages over thoroughbred racing, why does harness racing attract only a fraction of the interest that thoroughbred racing enjoys?