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CONTRARIAN VIEW**

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Drugs and Horses: A Slightly Contrarian View

It has become conventional wisdom to believe that drugs are the reason for thoroughbred horses making fewer starts in races and for the breed appearing to become increasingly less durable. The argument is that the increased use of drugs, including steroids, plus the legalization of certain race day medication is turning modern race horses into wimps who lack the stoutness of a Seabiscuit, Stymie, or Exterminator. Whether this decrease in starts has been caused by utilizing horses for breeding purposes who were dependent on medication for their performance, and who have passed on their infirmities to future generations, or whether it has been caused by overmedicating the actual race horses, conventional wisdom holds that the breed of thoroughbred horse is weakening in North America.

The problem with the conventional wisdom is that this trend towards fragility in thoroughbred horses should be paralleled by similar statistics in harness racing, which is also seeing increased drug usage. The statistics, however, do not demonstrate any increased fragility in harness horses. Instead, harness horses seem to be as durable as ever, if not more so. It may very well be that increased use of drugs is increasing the fragility of thoroughbreds, but the effects are probably somewhat less than conventional wisdom dictates.

Fewer Thoroughbred Starts

There is irrefutable abundant evidence establishing that thoroughbreds are making fewer starts than in prior years. The Jockey Club's Fact Book shows that thoroughbreds started an average of 6.8 times in 2002, which appears to be the lowest number of average starts in the last half century. Back in 1960, the average thoroughbred ran 11.31 times per year. In 1980, at the dawn of the era when certain drugs (lasix and phenylbutazone) became legalized for race day use, thoroughbreds still raced 9.21 times per year. Over the past 22 years, the number of starts per horse has been reduced by 26.1%, and we have witnessed approximately a 40% decline in annual starts per racing horse over the past 40 years.

During the last 20 years, we have also witnessed a revolution in the treatment of horses. Not only are certain drugs allowed on race day at threshold levels, but more and more medications are widely available and used for race horses in training and for younger horses getting ready for racing. So on its face it might be logical to believe that greater medication use is causing the decrease in annual thoroughbred starts per horse.

Harness Trends

There is little reason to believe that harness horses are as a group less medicated than thoroughbreds. While harness horses may race on lasix or phenylbutazone far less frequently than thoroughbreds, they do get the same overall medication as thoroughbreds.

In addition, because, harness horses race at a greater distance than most thoroughbreds, they are far more likely to receive unauthorized milkshakes than thoroughbred horses.

Yet the data on harness horses is quite different than the data on thoroughbreds. In 1980, harness horses in North America made an average of 16.1 starts per year. In 2002, the average number of starts per harness horse was 16.4 starts. The lowest average start number for harness horses was 15.2 starts in 1987. The average number of starts per harness horse over the past 15 years has actually increased by 7.9%. (Over that same period of time the average number of starts per thoroughbred horse decreased by approximately 15%.)

The 2002 figure for harness racing is hardly an aberration. The average number of starts per year per harness horse has changed little since 1994. In that 9-year span, the average number of starts per horse has always been between 16.3 and 16.5 starts.

Also the number of harness horses utilizing race day medication has increased significantly. In 1998, 27.2% of harness horses used lasix and/or bute at some point during the year. By 2002, that number increased to 33.5%, a 21.3% increase. While this number is considerably below the thoroughbred usage of race day medication, if race day medication was a significant factor in reducing starts, the number of starts per annum for harness horses should also be decreasing. Despite this rise in race day medication, that number has held steady over the past decade and is in fact an increase over the average harness horse start number for the late 1980's.

The fact that increased medication has played little role in the number of starts per harness horse is similarly confirmed when you look at the average number of career starts per year of foaling. Harness horse are eligible to run till the age of 14; so horses bred after 1988 could still be racing. Nevertheless, for the foal crops for the years of 1990-1994, the average number of career starts per foal year was 56.6 (with a high of 57.6 and a low of 56.1). For the foal crops of 1980-1984, the average number of career starts per foal year was 55.7. The advent of the era of increased medication does not seem to be having an effect on the number of starts per year of harness horses.

Obviously, a simple mathematical comparison ought not to be considered anywhere near conclusive on the subject of the durability of horses. But this analysis should point out that other factors, besides medication, may be at work in determining how frequently horse race. There have been changes in racing seasons, changes in the value of bloodstock, different trends and theories on how frequently horses should race in order to deliver peak performances, an increase in thoroughbred racing in the number of horses that specialize in only running on one surface, and changes in purse structure. All these factors need to be considered – in addition to medication – in assessing the decrease in the number of starts per thoroughbred horse per year. While we can generally say that race day medication has done little (perhaps nothing) to prevent the decrease in the number of starts per thoroughbred horse, the data from harness racing suggest that we ought to look further than merely medication to determine the cause of the decrease in thoroughbred starts.

Notes:

The thoroughbred data comes from The Jockey Club's Annual Fact Book. The 2003 Fact Book is on-line at <http://home.jockeyclub.com/FACTBOOK/index.html>.

The estimable and amazing David Carr of the United States Trotting Association provided the harness data.

Articles encompassing the convention wisdom of drugs and horse fragility include but are hardly limited to:

"Drugs turning horses into china dolls; another crop of derby hopefuls fall victim," Lexington Herald-Leader, April 17, 2003.

"Thoroughbred Racing Has an Old World Order," Washington Post, October 23, 2002.

"It's All In The Genes But Don't Discount The Size Factor," Sydney Morning Herald, May 17, 2002.

"Kentucky: Pharmacy State," Newsday, March 28, 2003.

"Durability: Little Hope With Dope," Newsday, March 4, 2003.

"Race-day medication takes toll on horses; gradual phase-out would help sport," Lexington Herald-Leader, November 7, 2002.