

# Will new anti-doping regs be enough to save horses—and horse racing?

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Drugging or "doping" thoroughbreds with medications that mask pain and enhance performance—sometimes beyond the breaking point—will no longer be allowed in horse races as of May 22.

The anti-doping regulations are a highlight of the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Act that marks a new era of federal racing regulation intended to protect race horses from injury and death.

But will the measures be enough to restore [public confidence](#) in a sport that saw seven thoroughbreds die at Churchill Downs in the lead up to this month's Kentucky Derby?

Northeastern Global News spoke to a Northeastern philosophy professor who specializes in applied ethics and an official with the Humane Society of the United States about what it will take for the public to embrace the act's reforms—or whether thoroughbred racing will peter out like dog racing.

## 'Really shocking stuff'

"When people hear of an act like this, it sounds to them like something is being done" to protect thoroughbred race horses, says Mark Wells, an assistant teaching professor of philosophy at Northeastern.

The 2008 race track euthanization of Eight Belles, a filly who broke her two front legs immediately after placing second in the Kentucky Derby, still shocks public consciousness. It is part of a drumroll of animal fatalities that included 42 horse deaths at California's famed Santa Anita race track in 2019.

"Really shocking stuff has happened," Wells says.

He says the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Act can lead to [public perception](#) that problems that led to thoroughbred deaths, including the seven who died in the pre-Derby lead up, will be addressed and prevented in the future.

It's one way for the industry to attempt to save itself, Wells says.

At Santa Anita, officials say steps they took to address thoroughbred safety in the wake of the 2019 tragedy led to a three-fold reduction in horse deaths, with 12 reported for all of 2022.

## **How 'doping' can mask injuries**

The horse racing safety act also addresses the use of whips and safety concerns regarding track surfaces, says Keith Dane, senior director in the equine protection program at the Humane Society of the United States.

But it is the anti-doping regulations that seem to hold the greatest potential for preventing horse injuries and deaths, he says.

"Drugs and medications are a major contributor to breakdowns," Dane says.

Pain-masking drugs hide potential fractures that animals should be allowed to heal from, instead of racing on, he says.

Performance enhancing drugs that push thoroughbreds "beyond their natural limits" can be another cause of injury, Dane says.

Although the horse racing safety act passed in 2020, lawsuits and other [legal action](#) stalled the introduction of anti-doping measures, he says.

The Federal Trade Commission, which oversees the policy-making authority established by the act, ordered the authority to proceed with anti-doping regulations as of May 22, in time for the June 10 Belmont Stakes but too late for this year's other Triple Crown events, the Kentucky Derby on May 6 and the Preakness on May 20.

Preventing equine casualties "is certainly the hope and what we're counting on," Dane says.

## **Will regs be enough?**

For now, trainers and owners are allowed to put thoroughbreds on Lasix to prevent pulmonary bleeding pending safety studies, Dane says.

Lasix, a powerful diuretic, is already banned on race day in Europe, Asia and Australia.

Whether anti-doping regulations will be enough to protect thoroughbreds remains to be seen, Wells says.

"Thoroughbreds are built for speed. And if you breed for one particular thing, you get other problems," as seen in the case with "designer" dogs such as pugs, he says.

Weighing about 1,000 pounds on delicate ankles, thoroughbreds are known for being fragile and sensitive even off the race course.

"We're running horses whose bone structures haven't fully developed," Wells says. "This is a dangerous activity we're making these animals do."

In the sad case of Medina Spirit, stripped of a 2021 Kentucky Derby win after failing a post-race drug test, the colt's death a few months later in December was attributed to a heart attack following a training exercise.

Although the thoroughbred's necropsy was incomplete, sampling of hair, urine and blood showed no evidence of doping, according to The New York Times.

## **An industry in decline**

Horse racing, once the only federally legal form of sports wagering in the U.S., has fallen into decline as other forms of legal sports gambling have taken off.

Race tracks have closed around the country. The number of bettors and amounts placed have declined, Dane says.

Public perception of horse racing has changed, with some people calling for outright bans on the sport and many others decrying what they see as animal cruelty in long-time practices such as drugging and whipping.

In the past, "people thought of it as a fun outing," Dane says. "If they could make a little money and have fun it was seen as a socially acceptable event. That era has passed. The generations that subscribed to horse racing have aged out."

But Wells says online horse race betting could actually be a boon for the industry, especially since participants don't have to be physically present at race tracks.

"It totally obscures the reality for the horse when it's just numbers on the page," he says.

## **Ban on racing of two-year-olds?**

PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, has called for further protection of [race](#) horses, including racing them only on grass not paved surfaces and prohibiting any kind of competitive racing before the horses turn three.

Current races for two-year-olds include the American Pharoah Stakes, which is considered a major stepping stone to the Kentucky Derby. The Derby, like the other Triple Crown races, is composed of 3-year-olds.

Whether the public continues to support horse racing "depends on how well the industry embraces the changes and subscribes to them," Dane says.

"We saw what happened with greyhound racing," he says. "That is an industry that is almost non-existent in the United States. An industry that treats the deaths of athletes as the cost of doing business is not going to last forever."

Provided by Northeastern University

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