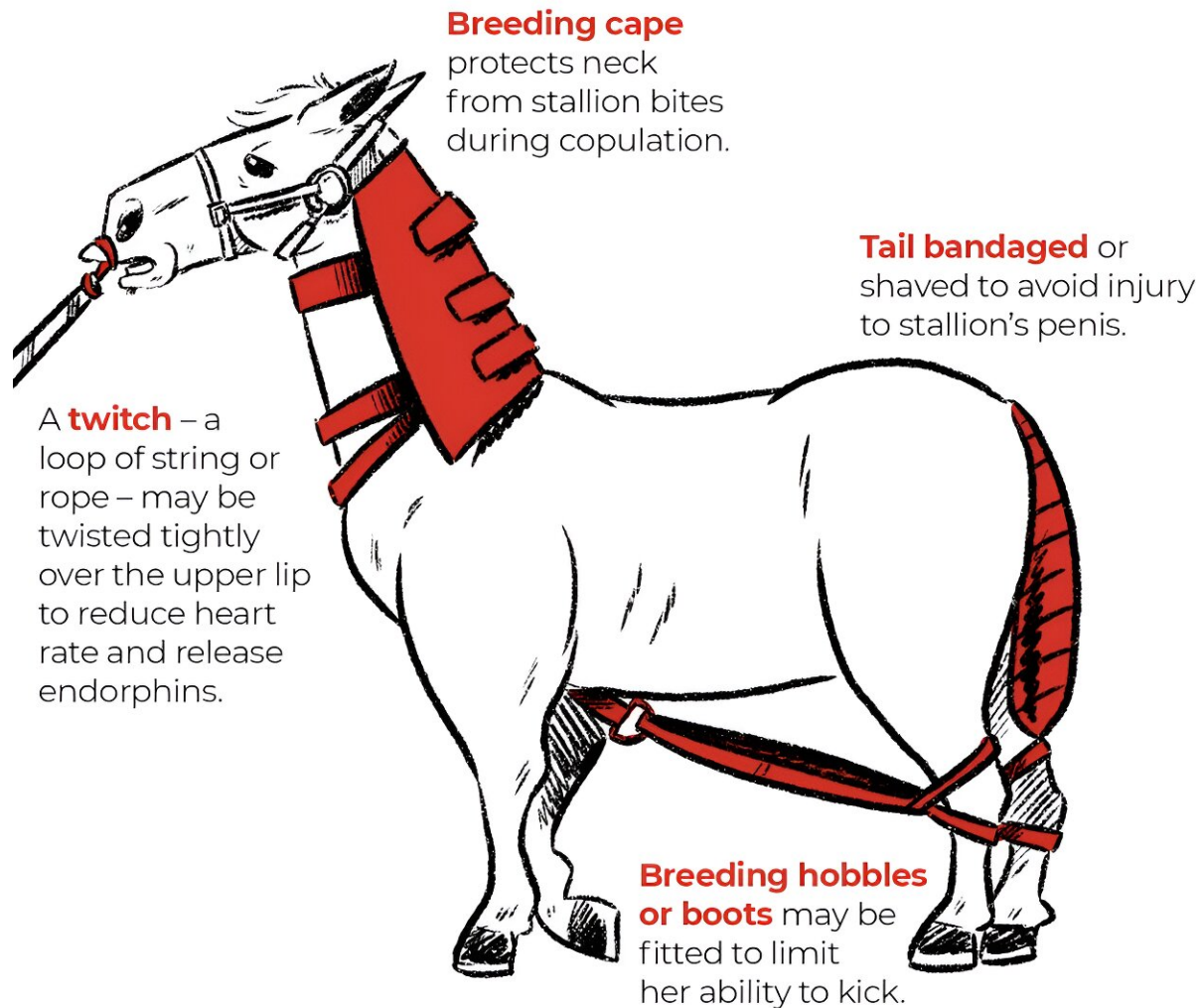


Thoroughbred horse's death prompts uncomfortable questions about how champion mares spend their retirement

August 20 2024, by Cathrynne Henshall

Restraining mares for Thoroughbred breeding



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The death of one of Australia's most-loved thoroughbreds, Black Caviar, brought an [outpouring of grief](#) from the racing industry and fans across the world.

It also sparked some uncomfortable questions about what retirement actually means for a champion mare like her and what really goes into breeding a racehorse.

Some [questioned the quality of care](#) she was given and whether she was valued for more than just her ability to produce foals. Many were surprised at how thoroughbred breeding works in practice, even for champions like Black Caviar.

Does good care always mean good welfare?

The background

Black Caviar gave birth to her final [foal](#) on Saturday morning. Shortly afterwards she was euthanized after contracting [laminitis](#) (an extremely painful condition in which blood flow to the hoof is severely restricted).

"She had a milk infection about a week ago and we just treated it like you do with all broodmares. But, like a lot of treatments, it went straight to her feet," [trainer Peter Moody](#) said.

"Basically, it killed her feet."

Continuing the sad news, the unbeaten mare's final foal, a colt, [died shortly after](#).

Black Caviar was one day shy of her 18th birthday when she died. Retired racehorses [often live](#) between 25–30 years.

Black Caviar died after delivering her ninth foal in 11 years since her retirement from racing in 2013.

The average gestation period for a horse [is 340 days](#).

Thoroughbred breeding basics

The Australian breeding season [begins on September 1](#) each year.

Mating is achieved "naturally" (use of artificial insemination is [banned for thoroughbreds worldwide](#))—although the process is dramatically different from what happens with horses in [natural settings](#).

In the wild, the mare usually initiates mating by approaching the stallion and performing a range of courtship behaviors before allowing him to mate (or "cover") her multiple times a day during her receptive period.

If she's not ready to breed, she will refuse the stallion's advances, which may include kicking and biting him or galloping away.

But at the stud, safety and efficiency is prioritized.

To prevent injury to the stallion and to facilitate an efficient covering, the mare will be fitted with equipment designed to ensure she can't react during the procedure.

To minimize kicking, she may be fitted with breeding hobbles or boots

that limit the movement of her hind legs. A breeding cape protects her neck from bites during copulation.

A device known as a twitch may be used as an additional form of restraint. This is a loop of string or rope that is twisted tightly around the upper lip, causing a [temporary reduction in heart rate](#) and the [release of endorphins](#) that induce calmness in the mare.

She may also have a foreleg held up while the stallion mounts to further restrict her ability to avoid the stallion.

The stallion's natural mating behavior is also restricted during mating. Instead of a courtship between two animals, the stallion is taught to mount the mare on command under the control of the handler.

What about animal welfare?

Throughbred breeding has a long history, but recently [community concerns](#) about the ethics of the industry have emerged.

One is the welfare of the animal during mating—not just the mare but the stallion and foal, and the care they receive after birth.

In Black Caviar's case, it's safe to assume she was given the very best care, considering her importance and value to her owners.

But even so, during covering, she would have been restrained like any other mare, having no agency in regards to who she was mated to or what happened to her.

Stallions are also affected by standard industry practices.

Once a stallion retires to stud, it will most likely be socially isolated from

horses other than during covering for the rest of their lives. Stallions living in the wild not only have the company of their mares, they [also regularly play with their foals](#).

It's also important to consider the quantity of horses being bred.

The racing industry relies on a continual supply of young horses, especially two and three-year-olds. In Australia, most of the biggest prizes in racing are age restricted, so owners and trainers need a continuous supply of young horses that are eligible for those races.

This creates a huge incentive to keep breeding, which adds more pressure on horses like Black Caviar to produce offspring, even as the mare ages and the [risks of poor outcomes increases](#).

Black Caviar had nine foals, but such a number isn't uncommon in the thoroughbred industry where access to the latest veterinary interventions is available.

In the wild, mares may only give birth to [five to seven foals in their lives](#) depending on the availability of food and protection from predators.

What does getting pregnant almost every year do to a mare?

More pregnancies mean there's generally more opportunities for things to go wrong.

As horses get older, the muscles, ligaments and tendons around their abdomen often get laxer and [they are more prone to infections](#), so they are more at risk of difficulties during and after pregnancy.

Every pregnancy accumulates the risk for mares once they are in their mid-to-late teens.

The economic realities of breeding

Finally, in analyzing the reaction to Black Caviar's death, it's apparent there's a sizable disconnect between people within the industry and those outside it.

Some outside "the bubble" [queried the treatment](#) of the champion racer. But many in the industry—including Thoroughbred Breeders NSW president Hamish Esplin—quickly [jumped to the defense](#) of Black Caviar's owners.

Every person who starts working in the racing or breeding industries does so because they have a true connection and love for horses. But there's no denying the economic truths—it's a business in which the primary assets are the horses, and mares generate income by producing foals.

Ultimately, all that care and concern for a horse is to ensure it can keep having foals for as long as possible.

Although Black Caviar's owners kept her foals rather than selling them as yearlings, which is the usual practice, those animals still entered the racing and breeding industries.

Undoubtedly, Black Caviar was much loved and received the best of care. But even after winning 25 races, she still had a job to do—produce as many foals as possible that might one day generate a similar return on investment as she did.

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