

## Horse racing must change, or the court of public opinion will bury it

Written by Phil McManus, Professor of Urban and Environmental Geography: Head of School of Geosciences, University of Sydney

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In the wake of a shocking ABC report on the dismal end of many racehorses' lives in slaughterhouses, many Australians are questioning whether the horse racing industry can operate ethically.

Some people will never agree that animals should be used for human entertainment. Others argue horse racing is ethical and has been so for decades. However, As Hall of Fame thoroughbred trainer Lee Freedman [tweeted](#) , "If we don't make real changes the court of public opinion will bury racing".

As long as racehorses are treated as commodities, it will make a cruel sort of sense to get rid of "surplus" animals as cheaply as possible.

Australian community standards demand we treat horses as more than objects. At an industry level, self-regulation has manifestly failed. It's time we created a national registry to trace racehorses for their whole lives, including life beyond the racing industry.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*We could reduce the slaughter of racehorses if we breed them for longer racing careers\*\*\*](#)

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## How much is welfare worth?

While, no doubt, investigations will begin into allegations of animal cruelty or rule-breaking in the Queensland abattoir filmed, the industry cannot hide behind claims this represents a few bad eggs.

Despite rules from the national body Racing Australia, and being a member of the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities (IFHA), Australia's racing rules are largely administered on a state-by-state basis, and different jurisdictions may have additional welfare requirements.

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This makes introducing change and enforcing consistent, socially acceptable standards difficult.

The solutions must be systemic. There are feasible options to bring horse racing industries closer to evolving public expectations of horse welfare. The question is, are the industries willing to change?

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**Read more:** [\*Is your horse normal? Now there's an app for that\*](#)

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Horse welfare should be paramount. This means a “whole of life” approach. Reducing the number of horses bred annually is, in isolation, not the answer. In 2007, 18,255 thoroughbred foals were born in [Australia](#) . In 2017 there were only 13,823 thoroughbred foals born. However, horses are still being sent to slaughterhouses.

Horse racing is a competitive industry. Some horses never win. Other horses will be injured or grow old. There will always be “too many” horses produced for racing and for the breeding part of the industry.

Owners and breeders need to plan for horses who one day may have little economic potential; they have as much right to welfare as any other creature.

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**Read more:** [\*Breeding Thoroughbreds is far from natural in the race for a winner\*](#)

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## A true national registry

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Australia needs a national traceability register to track all racehorses, through and after their racing careers. All pregnancies should be recorded, and all foals registered and microchipped. This will limit the potential for unregistered horses to be killed.

No registered racehorse should be sold through a “mixed sale” with cattle and other animals. No registered racehorse should be sent to or accepted at an abattoir.

It should be a condition of sale that when a horse leaves the racing industry that it is purchased with a clause that permits follow-up inspection, regardless of state borders or whether the horse goes on to be a companion animal, show jumper, police mount, or any other situation. (This is [already the case](#) in NSW and the ACT.) Rules without enforcement are ineffectual.

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**Read more:** [\*Who's responsible for the slaughtered ex-racehorses, and what can be done?\*](#)

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This may seem onerous, but the thoroughbred industry already assiduously monitors the registration of horses *into* the industry. They check whether the foal came from registered thoroughbred parents, a natural conception (male and female copulating) and the foal being born from the womb of that same mare.

The industry should apply the same diligence to the end of career treatment of racehorses, and accept responsibility for humanely euthanising horses after *all* other options have been exhausted.

An ethical industry cannot operate by ignoring inconvenient truths. The ABC report exposed some of these truths. Now it is necessary to make real changes to align horse racing with evolving social expectations of animal welfare.

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*Phil McManus has received funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) for thoroughbred-related research. He is a member of The Greens.*

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**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/horse-racing-must-change-or-the-court-of-public-opinion-will-bury-it-125637>