



# op/ed

by david powell

I recently came across an article I wrote which was published in *Pacemaker* in February, 1997. On the one hand, I felt that it had been a bit prophetic; on the other hand, little has been done to correct the situation in the 14 years since.

Bill Finley's recent prize-winning article, "[Do We Need A Sturdier Racehorse?](#)" comes as a timely reminder, which inspires me to bounce off both my paper and his with some "updates" and comments. (Read the original article [here](#) and then read on.)

The drift between U.S. and European breeding has in fact continued, with the predictable deleterious repercussion on the market which Arthur Hancock points out in Bill's piece.

The intransigence, not to say obsession, of the French authorities to detect and punish the most infinitesimal residues of any medication, continues apace, resulting in a spate of positives for cortisone in 2010, involving several highly respected trainers and veterinarians, when France Galop lowered the allowable thresholds for positivity without warning. The point of this exercise, focused on residual amounts of medication which cannot possibly have an impact on the horse's organism on race day, is questionable, unless, as we wrote in 1997, you wish to impose a set of rules where any horse requiring medication for an ailment should never race again. As we said, while this ideology obeys its own logic, we are not sure it is applicable in the real world.

Yes, if you apply pure Darwinism, you could say that any treatment required by a horse reveals a weakness, and that correcting this alters the rules of selection, and perpetrates the weakness treated when that animal is allowed to reproduce.

(Of course that could apply to feeding oats, as well: if we were only allowed to race horses who were out at grass, we would in fact select those who metabolize the best under those conditions. You could also say that any newborn foal who needs postnatal assistance should be allowed to die, because otherwise he or she may breed weaklings later .... the list is endless, but we have come a long way from there today).

I understand the theory, but doubt its pertinence: somewhere on the vast scale between denying any human "help," and over 85% racing on Bute and Lasix, there must be a reasonable compromise.

Bill Finley astutely writes "plenty of horses who may not have been successful on the racetrack without artificial assistance ... passed on their imperfections to future generations." I'd like to update the list of weaknesses recycled in the gene pool enumerated in the 1997 article by two major problems with which we are confronted daily: thanks to Gastrogard, many horses with ulcers have been able to perform at the highest level and have become stallions or broodmares whose progeny show the same inclination, and thanks to back medication, many with kissing spine lesions also: they would have been considered useless in the old days, but today their descendants need the same constant attention.

I have great respect for Dr. Bailey and Dr. MacLeod's work, but I beg to differ when they say that 40 to 50 years are not enough to modify the breed. In blind, random natural selection, yes, but in man-directed, accelerated selection, six or seven generations of reproducing a trait which was previously deleterious can count. If you change the rules of the game, you are creating the kind of situation which generates "evolutionary spurts" which we think occur when a natural catastrophe leads to mass extinctions and the expansion of new species.

On the fact that the average number of starts has fallen:

- Europeans traditionally considered training and racing at the U.S. tracks to be much harder on horses. Ironically, the two major sire influences of our time--Mr Prospector and Danzig--both "failed" the test of racing in the States. The former never won a graded race, and the latter ran only three times and is not even Black Type in a catalog due to unsoundness.

- On matter of year-round racing, I agree, a two- or three-month vacation once a year--and especially when there is less daylight--certainly prolongs a horse's usefulness. This just stands to reason and goes with Arthur Hancock's comment in Bill's piece about giving time rather than medication. A lot of subclinical pathologies will have time to repair naturally during this respite.

- On the matter of fractures, I think we are breeding more professionally than ever, and don't feel that bones are any brittle; however, we are getting close to the limit of speed which the equine frame can withstand (this goes for bleeding as well).

- Certainly, dehydrating horses with Lasix means they take longer to recover. That is obvious, and targeting specific races where they "give their all" likewise.

- I agree that a solid base on tracks is a negative; the natural sand tracks in the Sarthe area of France for example, are superlative because there is no resonance since there is no "base."

- I don't think one can equate speed with unsoundness, or stamina with soundness. There are plenty of very sound sprinters, and unsound stayers.

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### Op-Ed cont.

- Yes, the number of starts can be very much a management decision, and this goes slightly with the clientele. When the Maktoum-fueled market took off in the 80s, "business" people with no horse background came into the game with the idea that racing, especially for breeding, could be profitable, and these guys look at the statistics, not at the horses. As Bill Finley writes, they "flock" to the same trainers, which creates a cycle: they go there because the man is winning with 25% of his runners, and the trainer knows that this is what they expect of him, especially since the job they want him to do is to make the animal valuable for breeding; i.e., increase his resale value which can be higher than his earnings potential on the track. And finally, since that trainer has many well-bred animals, he is "selecting" on their morning workouts the ones who are going to start, which makes for short fields because some of those would have taken their chance in that race if they had been with another trainer...

Michael Dickinson--and this is a tribute to his intellectual honesty--once said to me, when he was winning with 30% of his National Hunt runners, that when his strike rate rose above 25%, it was a sign he was not running his horses often enough .

There are two ways of judging a stable: from the outside, where a high strike rate looks good, and from the inside, when you actually own horses there and you know how much it is costing you. The clients of the Gary Contessas of this world are in fact making more money because of that strategy, on race earnings alone.

There is another factor: "a bad effort in a big race can cost an owner millions..." Yes, the traditional pioneering American, upbeat, optimistic view was to remember a horse's good days and what he had accomplished rather than to consider his defeats as a blemish. It seems that the country has gotten a bit older, and we are drifting toward an old-world, negative attitude, quicker to criticize a horse for his shortcomings, where British journalists will write that a horse "has blotted his copy book" when he loses a race. So yes, "putting the sport back into the sport" could help.

Having said all this, some time ago I got fed up with using first-season sires who turned out useless, and did a study on which of the traditional criteria to anticipate success at stud would stand up in court. The only one was this--there were fewer failures among horses who had won over half their starts. Perplexing, and I have an idea why this may be, but this is no place to develop it.

In *Sturdier Racehorse*, Dr. Bramlage says, "...a horse that races as a 2-year-old is likely to have a lengthier, healthier career." Yes, and it is true that training them early, while respecting their growth, fortifies their heart, lungs, bones and tendons at a crucial time. However, those horses that race at two are the best and sturdiest anyway; they are a select group, so this is just a self-fulfilling prophecy. A trainer will run at two those which are showing the most, and standing up to their work. The other group are, by and large, the weaklings anyway.

Bob Baffert tells Bill Finley they would have to shut down racing if there weren't Lasix. This is not true: a race is relative. To win you only have to run faster than the competition, and without Lasix they would all just be going a little slower, and maybe the same horses wouldn't win the race, but you can ban Bute and Lasix overnight and people will still need to run their horses to pay their keep.

I look forward to more feedback from people in the industry.

*David Powell has been a breeder, owner, manager and trainer of racehorses in France since 1981, and was a longtime contributor of articles on racing and breeding, for several major racing publications in France, Britain and the United States. Feedback? Post it on the [TDN Forum](#), or send us a letter to [suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com](mailto:suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com).*

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