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by rob whiteley

The new *TDN* Topics feature ([click here to read TDN Topics: Should the Crop Be Banned?](#)) creates a great opportunity for those of us who care about the long-range health of racing to stand up and be counted. Therefore, I am moved to write one last time, despite being "retired" from 40 years of handicapping, betting, pedigree analysis, breeding, and racing.

The question: Should crops be banned?

My belief: Crops should not be banned. Crops need to be carried for jockey and horse safety, plain and simple. Crops are an essential tool as an aid in focusing a horse and controlling a dangerous situation.

It is not crops, but *whipping* that needs to be banned.

To me, discussion of whether whipping actually hurts horses or not, or whether whipping is necessary for optimal performance, is just a lot of blah blah blah. When our racing industry continues to decline year after year because of public perception, the realities of punishment or abuse are irrelevant. Public perception is everything.

If we wish to thrive in the future, we need to ban whipping to bring in enough new fans to grow the sport. End of story.

It's a reality of life that many would-be fans are turned off because of whipping. (One neighbor at my Kentucky Derby party watched American Pharoah get whacked over 30 times in the stretch and said, "If he were hitting a dog or even a chicken, he'd probably be thrown in jail"). My neighbor is not the Lone Ranger. There are many out there like him. All we have to do is ask our neighbors what they think (or ask our young daughters). At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if the horse is being hurt or not; only the perception matters. It defies basic business sense as well as common sense to keep on whipping.

It's not easy to change a culture created by habit. Contemporary jockeys whip because for the last 100 years they have always whipped. It's what they know. It's what they've always seen. It's what they've always done. Jockeys are not the bad guys in this, however. The fault lies in the rules.

In an "animal welfare world," we need to step back and get enough perspective to see that what has worked historically is now out of step with the times and with the future. The rules need to be changed and then enforced for all to see. Simply put, we need to ban whipping in order to grow our fan base and we need to grow our fan base in order to gain back lost media coverage throughout the year.

I agree with Graham Motion's perspective that the sport will not be harmed if whipping is banned. Over time, jockeys will adjust to the new level playing field and bettors will not see a change in their win percentage. The serious handicappers and horseplayers among us might even find more satisfaction.

Those of us who have bet on and watched thousands of races (in my case many thousands of races at more than 40 tracks) have torn up countless tickets when jockeys have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory with their use of the whip. If you are someone who watches closely, how many times have you watched a rider reach back to whip and get out of sync or lose momentum? How often have you seen a horse shy, veer, or duck in or out because of whipping? The way I see it, we won't be giving up much and the hard-core gambler part of me would be very happy if no one carried whips except for safety.

If we go hands and heels and use a crop for safety and control only, we will find out which jockeys have the most talent and horsemanship (meaning the best hands, communication, timing, and athleticism). We will also find out which racehorses are the soundest and most genuine. The best horses and jockeys will prevail and we will always have a winner. And, if we are smart in this way, maybe our industry can regain some of its lost stature in the hierarchy of American sports.

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