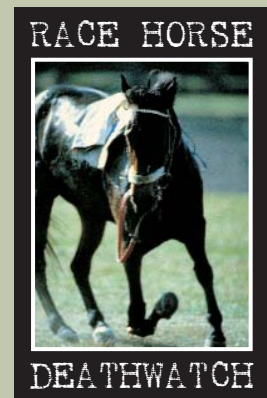


Race Horse Deathwatch: The First Year



A special report by Animal Aid's Horse Racing Consultant, Dene Stansall

Summary and Key Findings

Animal Aid's Race Horse Deathwatch is a unique online record of horses who are killed on British racecourses. We initiated the project because the industry itself publishes no such data. In the 12 months since its launch on March 13th 2007 – the start of that year's Cheltenham Festival – we have recorded, through diligent research, 161 fatalities. The true figure is likely to be higher. On-course fatalities are just part of the story. The best available evidence suggests that they represent around 38%* of the total number of horses who are 'raced to death' every year – that is to say, those who die from racing or training injuries or who are killed prematurely for commercial reasons. The total raced to death figure is about 420 horses. Given that there are some 15,000 horses currently in training, an annual attrition rate of 420 means that

one in 35 Thoroughbreds who start the season will be dead by the end of it.

- There were 161 on-course deaths during the first year of Race Horse Deathwatch. On average, fatalities occurred at the rate of more than three per week.
- The most lethal racecourse during the past 12 months was Sedgefield, Co. Durham, where 11 horses died in just 17 days racing. Most of Britain's 59 racecourses stage a similar number of meetings in a year.
- Wincanton in Somerset was the second deadliest with nine fatalities. Cheltenham (Glos.), Plumpton (E. Sussex) and Stratford (Warks.) each saw eight fatalities.
- Ten racecourses experienced two or more deaths in a single day. Four perished at Wincanton on March 19, 2007 and two more on December 26. Cheltenham and



Stratford both saw two deaths in one day on two occasions. And there were three deaths in one day at Newton Abbot (Devon), Market Rasen (Lincs) and Ludlow (Shrops).

- Richard Johnson and Tom Scudamore each had seven horses die under them during the year – more than any other jockey. They were followed by Will Kennedy with five.
- Philip Hobbs trained seven of the horses who died – more than any other trainer. Paul Nicholls trained six of the victims.
- Racing over the jumps was very much more dangerous for horses than running on the flat. National Hunt courses accounted for 85 per cent of the year's victims. Seven horses died from racing on the artificial surfaces of All Weather courses.
- Most horses died as a result of leg, neck or back injuries. But 16 collapsed and died – all but one having been entered into a National Hunt event.
- Summer jump races – introduced just a decade ago – killed 15 horses.
- The most dangerous age for a horse was 7. Thirty-one of that age died.

** The 38 per cent figure is derived from Animal Aid's earlier detailed research of deaths both on-course and off-course. A key report is that which focused on NH fatalities during the 1999/2000 season. Mortality data for Flat race horses – again both on- and off-course – were collated by Animal Aid for the 2000 Flat season. Both reports, and subsequent research, bear out the 38 per cent /62 per cent relationship between on- and off-course deaths.*

Introduction

Animal Aid's Race Horse Deathwatch

www.horsedeathwatch.com is an interactive website that records detailed information relating to on-course equine fatalities. As well as naming the horse victims, it also specifies the jockeys involved, the course where the fatality occurred, the condition of the ground, the cause of death, the age and rating of the horse, and other relevant information.

Little Brick, who broke a shoulder and was destroyed at the 2007 Cheltenham Festival, was the first Deathwatch entry. He was one of 23 horses in the crowded 3 mile-plus race. He had never been tested on a course as difficult as Cheltenham's and had recently returned from a racecourse absence of 490 days. There is a question as to whether his absence was caused by injury and whether he was still suffering its effects. The final entry of the first year of Deathwatch was **Earl Compton**. He had been raced five times in just 17 days when he broke a leg at Southwell All Weather course in Nottinghamshire. In fact, he had been worked hard – having been entered into a race roughly once a week – ever since his new owner/trainer, Stef Liddiard, began racing him in December 2007.

The alarmingly high number of horses killed around the country goes beyond previous estimates made by Animal Aid and puts pressure on the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) to take action. The BHA has resolutely failed to put into the public domain the numbers of horses killed on- and off-course, while dismissing those fatalities who do

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make the news as accidental or unexplained. Animal Aid's previous calculations suggested a figure of 375 horses raced to death every year – these being animals from the 'in-training' pool of active horses who die from injuries incurred from racing or whilst training, or who are killed for commercial reasons. The best evidence suggests that 38 per cent of these fatalities result from racing itself. Bearing in mind this percentage, the first year's Deathwatch returns (showing 161 on-course fatalities) mean that the annual raced to death figure is around 420 rather than 375. This figure translates into 2.9 per cent of the 15,000 horses in training. Or to put it at its most stark: around 1 in 35 of the horses who start the season will be dead by the end of it. The attrition rate for horses racing over the jumps is considerably higher – about 1 in 27 horses dead. This is because 85 per cent of racing deaths occur on National Hunt courses.

Sources of Data

The data for Race Horse Deathwatch have been obtained from numerous sources, including the official racing returns printed by *Raceform/Racing Post*; communication with racecourse officials,



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trainers and journalists; and reports from members of the public and race-goers whose information has been verified by recognised industry personnel.

Courses

There are 59 British racecourses and 45 of these recorded at least one death. Race horse fatalities occurred in all racing disciplines: National Hunt (NH), Turf Flat and All Weather Flat (AW). Many racecourses facilitate racing on both the Flat and National Hunt and some on All Weather surfaces, too. At Ascot, there were Flat and NH fatalities, while at Lingfield, there were deaths on the Flat, NH and AW surfaces.

There was a significant variation in the death figures, indicating serious problems at a number of courses. These include Sedgefield, Wincanton, Cheltenham, Plumpton, Stratford, Fontwell, Market Rasen and Uttoxeter. All are National Hunt courses and had five or more deaths.

Looking at All Weather course deaths, there were three on each of the Polytrack surfaces at Wolverhampton and Lingfield. One horse perished on Southwell's Fibresand track.

Of the Flat racecourses, Bath had the worst record, with three deaths.

Obstacles and Racing Surfaces

By far the most significant welfare problems arise from National Hunt racing, where horses jump Hurdle and Fence obstacles. As we've seen, NH courses are responsible for approximately 85 per cent of all the fatalities.

Taking this further, Hurdles and Fences account for roughly an equal number of deaths and, in turn, experienced Thoroughbreds die at the same rate as Novice horses.

The majority of the NH deaths followed falls that caused broken legs, necks and backs. Some of the victims died instantly but most suffered until their destruction by racecourse vets. A smaller number of injured horses were removed from the course to racecourse stables, horse hospitals or their training yards, where they were subsequently destroyed. The majority of falls occurred in the latter stages of races, when the horses were being pushed for a challenge or were tiring badly.

Some obstacles produce a particularly large number of fallers and fatalities, as borne out by historical data. A good example is the much discussed 14th



Fence of Cheltenham's Old Course. Another is the infamous Becher's Brook at Aintree, which remains lethal despite the introduction of highly publicised 'improvements'.

There was a clear trend of taking horses from the Flat arena and sending them Hurdling. Equally, inexperienced Hurdlers were sent Chasing, with sometimes fatal consequences. It is hard to imagine a young Flat horse being schooled successfully for a competitive Hurdle race within weeks of running on the Flat. This is illustrated by the case of **North Fleet**, a 4-year-old gelding who was killed in his first Hurdle event.

Whether entered into NH or Flat racing, horses are vulnerable if they lack experience and competence. Forty-seven horses who died during the past year had no official rating for the discipline in which they were racing. Whilst the majority of the 47 were Novices, as would be expected, the question must be asked: did these victims have the ability to compete in the races in which they were forced to take part? Once a Flat horse gets a rating, however, it is the middle rather than the lowest ranked Thoroughbreds who feature most prominently in Deathwatch. This runs contrary to the common industry assumption that horses rated below 45 are more likely to break down whilst racing. Despite this, the BHA is considering emulating Irish racing and barring the below 45's from competing, on the assumption that they are of too poor a quality to race. The ground conditions on which the NH deaths occurred ranged from Firm to Heavy. While this is

problematic in terms of assessing if there were contributing factors associated with specific 'going' conditions, it is well recognised that Firm surfaces cause jarring, which can lead to trauma-related injuries that often result in horses breaking down whilst racing. A Heavy surface can produce a similar outcome.

Flat horses also died on various turf ground conditions, with more than 50 per cent of deaths occurring on Good/Firm and Firm ground. However, 2-year-old **Alpen Adventure** was destroyed after racing on Heavy Ground at Beverley; he had stumbled and was pulled up. All Weather racing accounted for seven horse deaths. The Polytrack left-handed courses of Wolverhampton and Lingfield each claimed three horses, whilst right-handed Kempton claimed none. Southwell, which stages races on a Fibresand surface, recorded one death. Some will explain the disparity by noting that Southwell and Kempton had fewer races than both Wolverhampton and Lingfield. Against that is the fact that Lingfield also claimed victims on their turf Flat and NH courses, giving them a total of eight deaths.

Horses Pushed to their Limits

A total of 16 horses died as a result of heart attacks or internal haemorrhages. This would indicate that horses are being pushed beyond their physical capabilities – the term 'raced to death' being a fair description of what transpired.

Because 15 of the 16 'Collapsed and Died' victims were racing over the jumps, we can draw an obvious conclusion that NH events put greater pressure on the circulatory system and – because NH races are over longer distances than those on the Flat – they will exhaust horses over a longer period. Around one-third of the horses who collapsed did so after completing their races. Some actually won or were placed. Two of the three oldest horses who perished on-course during the past 12 months were Collapsed and Died victims. They were **Mighty Fine**, aged 13 and 15-year-old **Wot No Cash**.

Animal Aid has selected four horses who are representative of the majority of those who died in the past year. They were not high-flyers who received reams of racing news coverage, but the 'bread and butter' of the industry who keep the bookies well fed. Their tragic stories are briefly told.

Lochaneer (IRE) was a brown 7-year-old gelding who died at Sedgefield on the 17th November 2007. He had been born in Ireland in June 2000 and, in 2006, was bought cheaply at Ascot bloodstock sales to be an owner/trained horse at a small racing yard. His record showed that he had struggled terribly in all of his previous six races, pulling up well before the finish in four of them. He showed absolutely no ability to meet the demands of being a 'race horse' – he was, unfortunately, a complete 'no-hoper'. Starting the 2.05 race at odds of 250/1 against, he had little chance of ever winning this lowly-rated Chase event for horses, who, like him, had never won before. He had to compete by jumping 16 fences over a distance of two-and-a-half miles on a fast racing surface. He chased behind the leading horses for just over a mile then dropped right out of contention but the jockey continued before finally pulling him up three fences from the finish. Lochaneer then collapsed and died.

11-year-old mare, **Priests Bridge (IRE)**, became a statistic of 2007's worst day of racing when she was one of four horses killed at Somerset racecourse, Wincanton. Entered into a Novice Chase with five other runners, Priests Bridge was having her first race for three-and-a-half years – the lay-off having been caused by an injury. During her period away from racing, the mare was used for breeding and gave birth before returning to



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training. At an age when most horses are being considered for retirement, Priests Bridge was forced to earn her keep once more. She was entered for a race at Towcester, a month before her fatal run, but was withdrawn shortly before the start with a vet's certificate. What is more, the decision to run the horse at Wincanton in her first ever Chase, with a jockey who had never ridden the horse in a race, was poor judgement to say the least. It turned out that the jockey concerned, Tom Scudamore, went on to have six more of his mounts die. The start of the 3.30 race was delayed by 37 minutes, due to the destruction and removal of the bodies of two horses – **Stars In His Eyes** and **Warlord** – from the previous event. The stress of the delay must have affected all the runners and, once the race did get underway, Priests Bridge took a dreadful fall at the second fence and broke her neck.

Mighty Fine is a tragic example of a horse who was exploited for his ability to win races. By the age of 13, nearly all horses who have survived the hazardous life of racing have been retired, but not so for this grey gelding. He was bought on the 6th June 2007 for £5,000, having taken part in a Selling Race – an event in which all the horses taking part must be offered for sale. Trainer Paul Blockley wasted no time in getting the most out of his purchase for new owners, Cahill, Downs, Allen and Thomas. But 55 days after the bargain buy and with winnings of more than £20,000 from four races won and a second place, Mighty Fine was dead. In his final race he jumped 18 fences and ran 3 miles, leading the other ten horses throughout. In the final 100 yards, he tired badly but held on to win. Moments later he collapsed and died. The horse's previous owners accused Blockley of abusing Mighty Fine. Ken Slack told the *Racing Post* (03/08/2007): 'We were disappointed to see the old horse run into the ground the way he was. We'd had Mighty Fine since he was a yearling and he'd become something of a family pet, so it was very sad for us when we lost him [at the Selling Race]. Blockley called Slack's comments 'sour grapes'. And it can be noted that Mighty Fine's



previous owners were not compelled to enter him into the Selling Race and thereby be forced to yield him up to whoever offered the highest bid.

Tom The Piper had his first and last race on 23rd September 2007. For his introduction to racing, the 6-year-old bay gelding was placed in the hands of a conditional jockey, who himself had little racecourse experience. The horse, possibly scared and confused by the alien atmosphere of Uttoxeter racecourse, bolted and did a complete circuit of the course before the race had even started. At this point it would have been sensible to take into account the welfare and safety of both horse and rider. The racecourse officials, the veterinarians and the trainer – who also owned the horse – could each have put a case for withdrawing Tom The Piper. But they did not and he was forced to compete. He took a keen hold but was well behind other horses by halfway. He then suddenly 'broke down' and was pulled up. Broke down is a term used to describe a horse who has suffered a serious, and often life-threatening, injury during a race. This was the case with Tom The Piper: the horse was destroyed by vets at the course.

The tragic events that led to these four horses' deaths could have been avoided if those responsible for their care had shown some consideration and exercised common-sense judgments. There are another 157 on-course equine victims of the past 12 months, whose lives and deaths will not get the attention they deserve.

Conclusion

Surprising as it may sound, most of the 161 race horses who died during the first year of Deathwatch could still be alive today but for a combination of ignorance, apathy and callousness on the part of those responsible for their welfare. Serious shortcomings by trainers, jockeys, owners, clerks of the courses and veterinarians must be acknowledged. The ultimate responsibility, however, must lie with the British Horseracing Authority. The BHA structures and regulates racing, not only on a day-to-day basis but it also has the power to devise and implement innovative and fundamental change. The BHA's inability to get to grips with the consistently high number of race horse deaths constitutes a failure in its Duty of Care, under the Animal Welfare Act, towards the horses who race under BHA rules.

Statistics

13th March 2007 (start of the Cheltenham Festival) to 12th March 2008

TABLE 1

Racecourses, Discipline & Number of Horses who Died

Course	Discipline	Nos. Dead Horses
Sedgefield	NH	11
Wincanton	NH	9
Cheltenham	NH	8
Plumpton	NH	8
Stratford	NH	8
Fontwell	NH	7
Market Rasen	NH	7
Uttoxeter	NH	5
Carlisle	NH	4
Exeter	NH	4
Huntingdon	NH	4
Lingfield	NH	4
Ludlow	NH	4
Newton Abbot	NH	4
Towcester	NH	4
Aintree	NH	3
Ascot NH	NH	3
Bath	Flat	3
Cartmel	NH	3
Hereford	NH	3
Kelso	NH	3
Leicester	NH	3
Lingfield	AW	3
Wetherby	NH	3
Wolverhampton	AW	3
Worcester	NH	3
Bangor	NH	2
Chepstow	NH	2
Doncaster	NH	2
Haydock	NH	2
Hexham	NH	2
Kempton	NH	2
Musselburgh	NH	2
Perth	NH	2
Pontefract	Flat	2
Windsor	Flat	2
Ascot	Flat	1
Ayr	Flat	1
Ayr	NH	1
Beverley	Flat	1
Brighton	Flat	1
Catterick	NH	1
Chepstow	Flat	1
Fakenham	NH	1
Haydock	Flat	1
Leicester	Flat	1
Lingfield	Flat	1
Newcastle	NH	1
Newmarket RM	Flat	1
Salisbury	Flat	1
Southwell	AW	1
Southwell	NH	1
Taunton	NH	1
Total		161

TABLE 2

Racecourses with Multiple Deaths in a Day

Course	Multiple Deaths in a Day
Wincanton	4+2
Ludlow	3
Market Rasen	3
Newton Abbot	3
Cheltenham	2+2
Stratford	2+2
Carlisle	2
Fontwell	2
Plumpton	2
Sedgefield	2
Worcester	2

TABLE 3

Racing Discipline in which Horses Died

Discipline	Nos. Dead	%
NH	137	85
Flat	17	11
AW Flat	7	4

TABLE 4

Deaths in National Hunt Disciplines

Breakdown NH Disciplines	Deaths
Chase	31
Novice Chase	32
Hunter Chase	2
Hurdle	36
Novice Hurdle	33
NH Flat	3
Total Chase	65
Total Hurdle	69
Total NH Flat	3
NH Total	137



TABLE 5

All Weather surface Deaths

Breakdown AW surface	Deaths
Polytrack	6
Fibresand	1

TABLE 6

Disciplines in which Race Horses Collapsed & Died

Collapsed & Died	Nos. Dead	% of Total Horse Deaths
NH	15	9.32
AW	1	0.62
Flat	0	0
Total	16	9.94

TABLE 7

Jockeys with 5 or more Horses Killed

Jockey	Nos. of Horses who died whilst riding
Richard Johnson	7
Tom Scudamore	7
WT Kennedy	5

TABLE 8

Trainers with 5 or more Horses Killed

Trainer	Trainers Nos. of Horses who Died
PJ Hobbs	7
PF Nicholls	6
DE Pipe	5
NA Twiston-Davies	5
Miss Venetia Williams	5

TABLE 9

Horses who Died by Age

Age	Nos. Dead
2	4
3	8
4	19
5	25
6	26
7	31
8	20
9	13
10	6
11	4
12	2
13	1
14	1
15	1



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