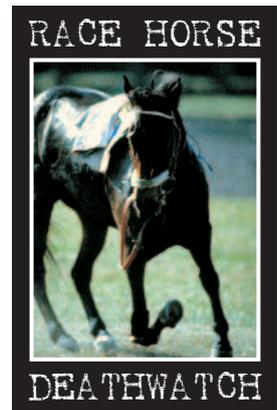


RACE HORSE DEATHWATCH THE SECOND YEAR



Race Horse Deaths on British Racecourses from
March 2008 to March 2009 **An Animal Aid Report**



Summary

Animal Aid's Race Horse Deathwatch is a unique online record of horses killed on British racecourses. Animal Aid initiated the database because the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) – the industry regulator charged with upholding race horse welfare – and Weatherby's, which keeps bloodstock records for the industry, fail to publish names and numbers of horses killed on British racecourses.

During the second year of *Deathwatch* – running from 13 March 2008 to 12 March 2009 – Animal Aid recorded **178 on-course fatalities**. This is an

increase on the first year, which saw 167 deaths. For both periods, the true figure is likely to be higher. In addition, on-course fatalities represent considerably less than the whole picture. The best available evidence suggests that they signify just 38%* of the total number of horses 'raced to death' every year – a term also encompassing horses who die at a later date from injuries received on a racecourse, or from training injuries, or who are destroyed prematurely for commercial reasons. The total 'raced to death' figure is at least 420 every year. Given that there are around 15,000 horses in training, an annual fatality rate of 420 means that one in 36 Thoroughbreds who start



the season will be dead by the end of it. Among the many issues thrown up by the alarmingly high on-course attrition rate is the competence of the vets called upon to destroy injured horses. The destruction takes place behind green screens to shield the public from the brutal reality. What happens behind those screens is usually carefully concealed, but a photographer recently obtained a series of images of a vet at Newton Abbot racecourse attempting to shoot a horse, known as Ashby Jo, in the head. The unpublished photographs were passed to Animal Aid. See page 5 for a fuller account of what appeared to be a crude and roughly handled episode. Given that a large majority of on-course deaths rely upon a vet's bullet or hypodermic needle (rather than the horse dying from his or her injuries), questions of suitable training and ongoing assessment are paramount.

** The 38% 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 National Hunt fatalities during the 1999/2000 season. Mortality data for Flat race horses – again both on- and off-course – was collated by Animal Aid for the 2000 Flat season. Both reports, and subsequent research, bear out the 38%/62% relationship between on- and off-course deaths.*

Key Findings

- There were **178 horses killed on British racecourses** during the second year of *Race Horse Deathwatch*, a 6.6% increase on the first year. This equates to one death every two racing days (for the complete picture see *Table 1*).
- Jump racing was significantly more dangerous to horses than Flat and All-Weather racing. It accounted for more than 75% of deaths (see *Table 2*).
- If we judge the death rate of a course by looking at the number of horses killed against the number of days racing staged, the most lethal racecourse was **Sandown Park** – a National Hunt (NH) course – followed by **Cartmel (NH)**, **Lingfield (NH)** and **Musselburgh (NH)** (see *Table 3*).
- The course with the highest number of horse deaths was **Newton Abbot (NH)**, with a total of eight (see *Table 4*).
- **Chester** racecourse had the worst record of the Flat (turf) racecourses, with two deaths from 14 days' racing (see *Table 5*).
- Fourteen Flat racecourses (45% of all Flat courses) had at least one death (see *Table 6*).
- All-Weather racing saw a notable increase in deaths – up from seven in the first year to 23 in the second. **Kempton Park (Polytrack)** came out worst of all of the five British All-Weather tracks, accounting for seven of the fatalities (see *Table 7*).
- The All-Weather Polytrack surface, in actual numbers and percentage terms, accounted for considerably more deaths than the Fibresand surface (see *Table 8*).
- There were four starting stall incident-related deaths (see *Table 9*).
- Fourteen horses collapsed and died, either during a race or shortly after passing the finishing line (see *Table 10*).
- The majority of horses who died suffered catastrophic injuries whilst racing, in the form of fractured limbs and spinal injuries. These resulted in their destruction.
- Summer jump races killed 22 horses – a dramatic 47% increase on the previous year.

Introduction

As well as the names and details of the horses who are killed, Animal Aid's *Race Horse Deathwatch* identifies the racecourse where the death happened, the relevant ground and racing conditions, and the jockeys involved. *Deathwatch* was initiated in mid-March 2007, at the start of the Cheltenham Festival. This report sets out and analyses the key data relating to the second year of *Deathwatch* – running from mid-March 2008 to mid-March 2009.

The findings make stark reading, not only in terms of the sheer volume of horses killed, but because of the way they highlight a range of strategic failings by the regulatory body, the BHA. The introduction of a number of straightforward, practical measures would very quickly result in a significant reduction in horse suffering, injuries and death. Such measures include:

- an audit of all 60 British racecourses to identify and speedily eliminate key hazards for horses
- formal intervention in the schooling methods used for horses in order to ensure that animals are not dangerously ill-prepared for

races they are entered into, and to ensure also that they are not pushed too hard (for instance, through excessive uphill training)

- the introduction of measures to ensure that vets charged with destroying horses injured during races are trained specifically for that difficult task and that they are periodically assessed

Sources of Data

The data for *Race Horse Deathwatch* is obtained from numerous sources, including the official racing returns, communication with racecourse officials and trainers and reports from a network of vigilant race-goers and members of the public, whose information has been verified.

Racecourses

There are 60 British racecourses and 48 (80%) of these recorded at least one death. All racing disciplines killed horses: All Weather (AW), Turf Flat and National Hunt (jumping).

There was significant variation in the number of horses killed at different racecourses.



Newton Abbot saw the most victims, with eight dead. But other National Hunt courses – notably Sandown, Cartmel, Lingfield and Musselburgh – experienced a greater attrition rate than Newton Abbot when the number of days’ racing is taken into account. Each saw an even higher percentage of deaths than that racked up at the most lethal course during the first year of *Deathwatch*: Sedgefield. As a result of our report on the Sedgefield carnage, the British Horseracing Authority launched an inquiry. Perhaps as a consequence, Sedgefield’s fatality rate has reduced significantly.

All-Weather course deaths rose strikingly during the second year of *Deathwatch*, with 23 horses killed compared with the preceding year’s tally of seven.

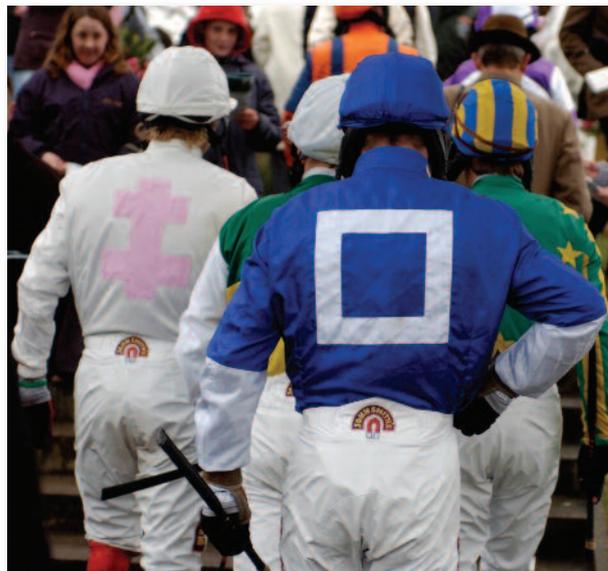
Fourteen Flat racecourses also saw fatalities, one more than the first year of *Deathwatch*. Chester came out the worst of all, with two horses dead from 14 days’ racing.



Obstacles and Racing Surfaces

It is National Hunt (jump) racing that exacts the most severe toll upon race horses (see *Table 2*). Both hurdlers and chasers – novice and seasoned jumpers alike – fall victim to the obstacles they are compelled to jump at speed. Clearly, schooling methods should be questioned – as should the nature of the hurdle and chase obstacles themselves. Such an investigation would assess the degree of difficulty of obstacles, as well as their positioning.

While some horses were killed instantly in a fall, the majority suffered injuries that were devastating but did not kill them. These horses were usually shot but sometimes given a lethal injection. Broken legs and pelvic injuries were common, as was spinal



damage to the neck and back that left many horses in a quadriplegic condition.

All-Weather racing saw a dramatic increase in fatalities. The relatively new right-handed Polytrack surface at Kempton Park saw seven horses ‘break down’ (suffer a serious injury). Britain’s newest racecourse, Great Leighs (Polytrack), saw three deaths in its early meetings. And Wolverhampton and Lingfield (both Polytrack) experienced a high level of fatalities. Southwell, Britain’s only Fibresand track, had fewer deaths than other All-Weather courses, both in terms of actual numbers killed and when the number of days racing is taken into account.

Flat racing on turf saw an increase in fatalities. Chester saw two deaths in just 14 days of racing, while Pontefract saw two deaths over 15 racing days.

Four horses died in starting stall related incidents. This is another aspect requiring urgent attention, both with regard to stall safety design and the procedures used for loading horses into such a confined space.

Horses Pushed to Their Limits

Fourteen horses collapsed and died whilst racing, or shortly after the finishing line (see *Table 10*). The fact that 11 of those 14 fatalities occurred in National Hunt racing leads us to the view that the extreme demands made on jump horses places on them an unacceptable physical toll both in terms of distance raced and the obstacles with which they are confronted.

Animal Aid has selected four horses to represent those who died in the past year. They were not the well-known 'stars' of racing but the uncelebrated day-in-day-out runners at minor meetings, whose lives were taken behind the green screens.

Ashby Jo

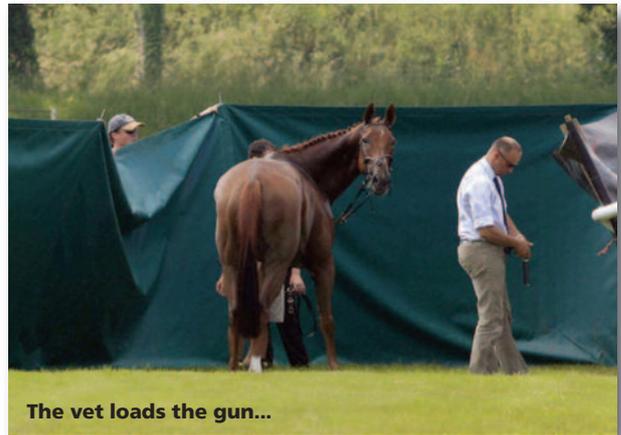
The circumstances surrounding the death of seven-year-old Ashby Jo at Newton Abbot during the summer jump racing season prompts serious concerns about the training of vets charged with the actual destruction of horses on racecourses. Animal Aid was sent a series of photographs of Ashby Jo's killing by racecourse photographer, Alan McNamee. The images show that the vet took hold of a loaded pistol with silencer and attempted to shoot the horse in the head. The photographer claimed he failed three times to kill the horse, reloading with each attempt and leaving a still-conscious Ashby Jo with a bullet-hole through his ear (according to his trainer). The photo sequence (right) further shows that one of the shots blew his noseband away and that Ashby Jo is in a highly stressed and emotional state. The images suggest that the horse was handled in an extremely rough manner, all the while being held on an unsuitably long rein by a solitary assistant. This would have made control of the stressed Thoroughbred more difficult. The horse was finally killed by an injection after another vet came to assist.

Bilingual

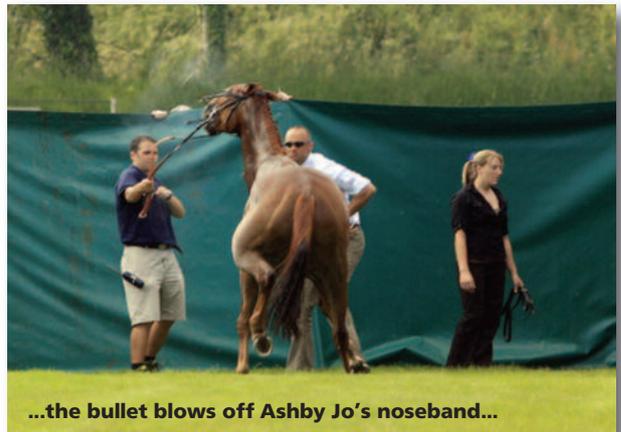
At the age of ten, when many race horses are being considered for possible retirement, Bilingual was to have his first and final outing on a racecourse. The event was a Hunter Chase at Kelso, a race for amateur riders, often on horses with little experience of competitive running. This was the case with Bilingual, who, before Kelso, had been entered into just a handful of lower-ranking races for the hunting fraternity, known as point-to-point. He'd been entered into just one such event during the five years prior to his fatal outing at Kelso. Bilingual was a distant third when he fell four fences from the finish, and was destroyed. Just four of the ten runners completed the course. One commentator described the two-and-three-quarter mile race as a 'gruelling test'.

Commercial Flyer

If ever a race horse was exploited for financial gain then Commercial Flyer was the prime example. In a



The vet loads the gun...



...the bullet blows off Ashby Jo's noseband...



...roughly handled by the vet...



...vet aims again at Ashby Jo's head

desperate race for the trainer's title back in 2005, Commercial Flyer, then aged six, was forced to race in five events in just 12 days, three of which took place over three days – a likely record work rate for a jumping horse. For those final five events, he was carted more than 1,000 miles, with long hours in the horsebox. He was transported from Exeter, England's most southern course, to Perth, the most northerly course in Scotland, and then down to Sandown, near London. Commercial Flyer gave his all during those twelve days, winning four of his five races. However, after those exploits, he rarely completed a race. Eventually, he was dropped by his leading trainer and wealthy owner and passed to a stable for whom he raced twice. Commercial Flyer perished in a three-mile chase on testing soft ground, at Ayr, in March 2009. He had almost stopped six fences from the end but continued and, two fences later, fell and was destroyed. According to the Racing Post's 'race-reader': 'Only four horses faced the starter but there was no shortage of mishaps and incidents.'

Deserted Dane

A fashionably bred colt from the USA, Deserted Dane was sold at bloodstock sales in Ireland at 18 months old, and then sold on again in England six months later. From his new base in Yorkshire, he showed some promise on the racecourse – so much so, that he was flown out to race in Dubai for a two-month period. Returning to England, he raced consistently around northern tracks picking up small amounts of prize-money. Then, at Catterick Bridge racecourse in the height of summer, he died in a starting stall incident, similar to that which cost the lives of three other horses during the season. Many horses are reluctant to enter the confined area of a starting stall. Putting



A horse panicking in the stalls – on her knees and trying to get out



Many 'failed' racehorses are slaughtered

a blindfold hood over the head is a commonly used tactic to trick a horse into the stall. Often this will be combined with lots of pushing from behind to force the reluctant animal forward. Once in the stalls, worried horses frequently rear up. Some go down on their knees. A frightened Deserted Dane reared as the stall doors opened, and he sustained a fatal injury. He was just four years old.

Conclusion

A toll of 178 deaths in one year on British racecourses should ring alarm bells for anyone concerned with the welfare of animals. Most of all, the carnage should finally rouse to action the British Horseracing Authority, whose regulatory obligations includes protecting from harm the most important asset upon which the multi-billion pound racing industry depends: the Thoroughbred horse.

Deaths on racecourses have a number of causes. In part, they are due to the physiology of selectively bred modern race horses and the physical demands made upon them. They have been bred for speed at the cost of skeletal strength, general robustness and the often-problematic heart and cardiovascular system. Other factors involve intensive training methods, whereby horses are exercised too hard, resulting in breakdowns either on the training gallops or on a racecourse. The poor schooling of horses also leads to fatalities. Their tutoring can be rushed and inadequate, making them ill-prepared for competitive racing. Many deaths also occur because of the demanding characteristics of racecourses themselves and

because of detrimental ground conditions (i.e. too firm, too heavy, or uneven). Then there are the obstacles horses are forced to jump at speed, often having been whipped in the approach. Some fences do not have enough 'give' in them and, if hit, can result in rotational falls, whereby the horse somersaults and risks a fatal spinal injury. The positioning of fences can also present special challenges. For example, they might be too close to the start or located on a downhill stretch, causing the horse to be unbalanced when pressed to jump.

When horses do suffer an injury, an issue of critical importance is the competence of the on-course vets charged – when deemed appropriate – with destroying animals. The majority of the 170-plus horses who perish each season as a result of racecourse injuries, are killed by vets rather than die outright from their injuries. Do these practitioners have judgement sound enough to decide whether a horse lives or dies? Are they equipped with enough of the right kind of training so that they have what it takes to subdue animals who are in pain, scared and probably stressed by the crowd and by the alien raceday environment? After subduing them, are they then able swiftly and competently to despatch doomed animals with a gun or syringe? The images of Ashby Jo being shot at Newton Abbot show anything but a swift and painless death. It is reasonable to suppose that such scenes, though invariably hidden from the public by green screens, are commonplace.

The Failure of Racing's 'Regulator'

The sorry situation we lay bare in Year Two of *Race Horse Deathwatch* arises from the shortcomings of trainers, jockeys, owners, racecourse managers, clerks of the courses and veterinarians.

The most culpable of all the parties, however, is the British Horseracing Authority, which is charged with ensuring that horses who race in Britain under its Rules of Racing are properly cared for. The BHA, and its predecessor bodies, have failed in this duty. Horse deaths on racecourses are increasing and yet the BHA has not only neglected to produce an identifiable strategy for tackling the problem, it refuses to acknowledge there is a problem. In fact, it refuses even to publish straightforward data on racecourse injuries and fatalities. This stonewalling cannot continue. Race horse welfare is moving up the news agenda. Nearly 60 MPs have already signed a parliamentary motion demanding reform. And even leading newspaper racing correspondents are engaged in earnest contemplation of such issues as Thoroughbred over-production, slaughter of 'surplus' stock and use of the whip, as well as racecourse fatalities. Time is fast running out for the BHA. If it continues to show an inability or unwillingness to produce remedies for the serious welfare problems that beset racing, then the pressure will grow for government to strip it of its self-regulatory privileges and for the government itself to call the industry to account.



Statistics

Mid-March 2008 to mid-March 2009

TABLE 1

Breakdown of Deaths on British Racecourses

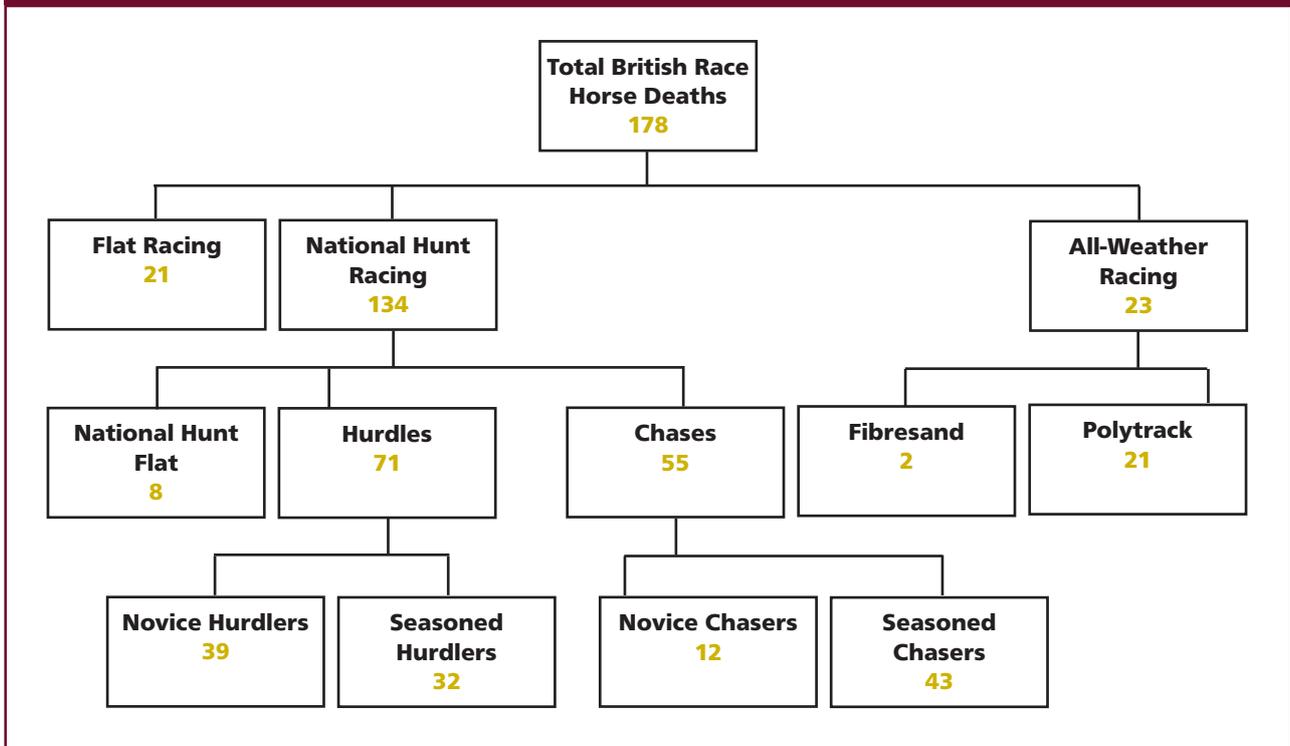


TABLE 2 Racing Discipline in which Horses Died and Number of Deaths

Discipline	Nos. Dead
National Hunt	134
All-Weather Flat	23
Flat	21
Total	178

TABLE 2 – CHART Racing Discipline in which Horses Died and Number of Deaths

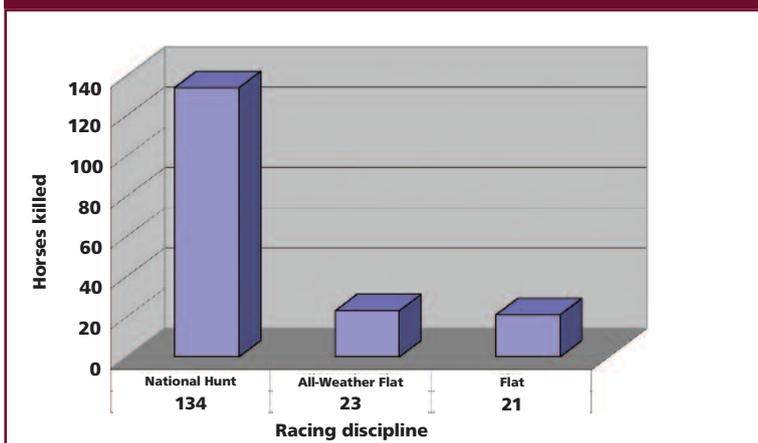


TABLE 3

National Hunt Racing: Deaths in Relation to Number of Days' Racing at each Course

National Hunt Racecourse	Deaths	Days' Racing	Deaths per 100 days' Racing
Sandown Park*	7	9	77.8
Cartmel	4	6	66.7
Lingfield Park	2	3	66.7
Musselburgh	5	8	62.5
Perth	6	12	50
Newton Abbot	8	17	47.1
Aintree	4	9	44.4
Worcester	6	14	42.9
Hereford	4	10	40
Ludlow	5	13	38.5
Doncaster	3	8	37.5
Huntingdon	6	16	37.5
Southwell	4	11	36.4
Haydock Park	2	6	33.3
Newcastle	3	9	33.3
Sedgefield	5	16	31.3
Kelso	3	10	30
Market Rasen	5	17	29.4
Cheltenham	4	14	28.6
Plumpton	4	14	28.6
Ayr	3	11	27.3
Newbury	3	11	27.3
Uttoxeter	6	22	27.3
Stratford-on-Avon	4	15	26.7
Wincanton	4	17	23.5
Carlisle	2	9	22.2
Fakenham	2	9	22.2
Towcester	4	18	22.2
Wetherby	3	16	18.8
Taunton	2	13	15.4
Bangor-on-Dee	2	14	14.3
Catterick Bridge	1	7	14.3
Leicester	1	7	14.3
Fontwell Park	3	22	13.6
Folkestone	1	8	12.5
Kempton Park	1	11	9.1
Chepstow	1	14	7.1
Exeter	1	14	7.1
Ascot	0	8	0
Hexham	0	13	0
Warwick	0	6	0
Total	134	487	27.5

*including Mixed-Meeting of NH and Flat

TABLE 4 Number of Deaths at each National Hunt Racecourse

National Hunt Racecourse	Deaths
Newton Abbot	8
Sandown Park*	7
Huntingdon	6
Perth	6
Uttoxeter	6
Worcester	6
Musselburgh	5
Ludlow	5
Market Rasen	5
Sedgefield	5
Aintree	4
Cartmel	4
Cheltenham	4
Hereford	4
Plumpton	4
Southwell	4
Stratford-on-Avon	4
Towcester	4
Wincanton	4
Ayr	3
Doncaster	3
Fontwell Park	3
Kelso	3
Newbury	3
Newcastle	3
Wetherby	3
Bangor-on-Dee	2
Carlisle	2
Fakenham	2
Haydock Park	2
Lingfield Park	2
Taunton	2
Catterick Bridge	1
Chepstow	1
Exeter	1
Folkestone	1
Kempton Park	1
Leicester	1
Ascot	0
Hexham	0
Warwick	0
Total	134

*including Mixed-Meeting of NH and Flat

TABLE 5

Flat Racing: Deaths in Relation to Number of Days' Racing at each Course

Flat Racecourse	Deaths	Days' Racing	Deaths per 100 days' Racing
Chester	2	14	14.3
Pontefract	2	15	13.3
Ascot	2	17	11.8
Catterick Bridge	2	17	11.8
Chepstow	1	19	11.1
Sandown Park	2	20	10
Windsor	2	26	7.7
Warwick	1	14	7.1
Folkestone	1	15	6.7
Newmarket	2	38	5.3
Bath	1	20	5
Leicester	1	20	5
Doncaster	1	23	4.3
Great Yarmouth	1	23	4.3
Epsom	0	2	0
Southwell	0	3	0
Carlisle	0	7	0
Lingfield Park*	0	11	0
York	0	11	0
Newcastle	0	12	0
Thirsk	0	13	0
Ayr	0	14	0
Ripon	0	15	0
Salisbury	0	16	0
Musselburgh	0	17	0
Redcar	0	17	0
Hamilton Park	0	18	0
Newbury	0	19	0
Nottingham	0	19	0
Beverley	0	20	0
Brighton	0	21	0
Haydock Park	0	21	0
Goodwood	0	22	0
Total	21	549	3.8

*run in conjunction with All-Weather meetings

TABLE 6

Number of Deaths at each Flat Racecourse

Flat Racecourse	Deaths
Ascot	2
Catterick Bridge	2
Chester	2
Newmarket	2
Pontefract	2
Sandown Park	2
Windsor	2
Bath	1
Chepstow	1
Doncaster	1
Folkestone	1
Great Yarmouth	1
Leicester	1
Warwick	1
Total	21

TABLE 7

All-Weather Racing: Deaths in Relation to Number of Days' Racing at each Course

All-Weather Racecourse	Deaths	Days' Racing	Deaths per 100 days' Racing
Kempton Park	7	80	8.8
Lingfield Park*	5	77	6.5
Wolverhampton	6	92	6.5
Great Leighs	3	48	6.3
Southwell	2	63	3.2
Total	23	360	6.4

*run in conjunction with Flat turf meetings

TABLE 8

Deaths on both All-Weather Racing Surfaces in Relation to Number of Days' Racing

All-Weather Surface	Deaths	Days' Racing	Deaths per 100 days' Racing
Polytrack	21	297	7.1
Fibresand	2	63	3.2

TABLE 9

Starting Stall Incident-Related Horse Deaths: 4

TABLE 10

Racing Discipline in which Horses Collapsed and Died

Race Horses who Collapsed and Died	Nos. Dead
National Hunt	11
All-Weather Flat	2
Flat	1
Total	14



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