



Op/ed

by craig bandoroff

The horses of Achilles stood apart from the battle weeping, since they had learnt that their charioteer had fallen in the dust beneath the hands of man-slaying Hector. Automedon whipped them with his swift lash, cajoled them with his gentle words and threatened them, but the pair would neither return to the ships on the Hellespont, nor go back into the battle. They remained immovable before their beautiful chariot, bowing their heads to the earth. Hot tears flowed from their eyes as they mourned in sorrow for their charioteer, and their long manes were soiled as they streamed down from their yoke cushion. When Zeus saw their grief, he took pity on them. "Poor creatures! Why did I give you to King Peleus, who is a mortal destined for death? You, who are immortal. What have you to do with man, who, of all beasts on the earth, is the most miserable?" –Homer, The Iliad

I've read about all I care to read in the last week since the latest *NY Times* assault appeared. Probably the last thing any of us needs is another opinion, but sometimes the best way to mourn is to express oneself and I'm in mourning. Like my friends Barry Weisbord and Gary Biszantz, I'm mad as hell. Like my friends, Barry Irwin, Bill Oppenheim and so many others, I want leaders our industry to clean it up, address its problems, and make changes before it is too late. But if I have to choose one adjective that best describes my emotions, it's not mad, or frustrated, or exhausted, or sickened, (all of which apply). It's sad. Let me explain.

It all started for me when I was maybe six years old or younger. I vividly remember being in the back seat of my parents' car and seeing a horse van filled with race horses with their heads sticking out the window. They were traveling to Garden State Park, a major league track on the East Coast at that time. Like Renee Zellweger said to Tom Cruise in one of my favorite movies, Jerry McGuire, "You had me at hello." Who were these beautiful animals? I was instantly, hopelessly in love. Whenever we would drive by the stable area, my nose was pressed to the window hoping to steal a glimpse, through the concealment of the planted shrubbery, of my new love, the thoroughbred horse. Fast forward a few years and I'm about nine years old and in the emergency room from an accident only a rambunctious nine-year-old boy can impart on himself.

My concerned mother at my side offers that whatever I want is mine. Anything. My answer: please take me to the racetrack to see those beautiful animals

perform.

In my lifetime I have ridden them, groomed them, cared for them, and admired them for the incredible athletes they are. I have used them as a means of commerce and to make a living. Horses have provided me and my family with a life better than I ever dreamed of having. Horses have enabled me to offer good respectful jobs to hundreds of people. They have afforded me the highest of highs and the lowest of lows as only something you love and respect and care about can do. Every material thing I have come to me because of a horse.

I'm not going to bore you with my opinion of what we need to do to fix this mess. Lord knows I've tried with other well-meaning people to come up with solutions and I'll continue to try. I'm as upset, frustrated, aggravated, dejected and mad as anyone in the room. But mostly I'm sad.

Federal regulation, centralized organization, Jockey Club Round Tables, a new group with teeth, some medication, no medication blah, blah blah. It's the same conversation and the same banter I've heard for 30 years. I have my ideas and opinions of what we should do like everyone else. I know what I know and what I don't know. What I know is I'm not smart enough to know what the answers are and how to get a consensus to do it. What I know is even with so many smart, well-meaning, and caring people in this industry we can't get it right, can't get it done. What I don't know or understand is why.

I know when I stand in front of my barn selling horses that I don't see nearly the number of the international buyers I used to see. I know when I travel abroad I have to defend our product to others that used to come here to buy it. That's not conjecture, that's not perception, that's the hard cold reality. I know despite increasing popularity for horse racing throughout the world, in this country our handle has gone down, stands built for the huge crowds of yesteryear are empty, and lots of people think our game stinks. And I know lots of people that own and love horses don't want to have anything to do with us. I also know this has to be one of the greatest sports and greatest games ever invented. And I know why that is: it's the horse, stupid! How else could American racing have survived years of mismanagement, infighting, and refusal of factions to say if we put the good of the game first the rest will take care of itself.

So while we are wringing our hands, wondering what

I know despite increasing popularity for horse racing throughout the world, in this country our handle has gone down, stands built for the huge crowds of yesteryear are empty, and lots of people think our game stinks. And I know lots of people that own and love horses who don't want to have anything to do with us.

the next *NY Times* article and PETA video will reveal, maybe we should just step back and approach it with one thing in mind: the horse. Isn't that why you are here in whatever capacity it is? Isn't that where it all started for you? Isn't that what we should get back to? Of everything I read I think Andrew Cohen said it best in his [Atlantic magazine article](#). If you haven't read it, read it. You owe that much to the horse.

I'm not sure where I came across this excerpt from The Iliad. It has hung on my wall for many years. When I read it today my tears join "the hot tears that flow from their eyes... The ending, "What have you to do with man, who of all beasts on earth, is most miserable." has never rung so true to me.

I am sad. Please someone, anyone, everyone, let's fix it for the horses. As Kevin Costner said in another of my favorite movies, *For the Love of the Game*, "the game doesn't stink... it's a great game."

Right now, I'm not so sure of that. But I'm sure it could be again.