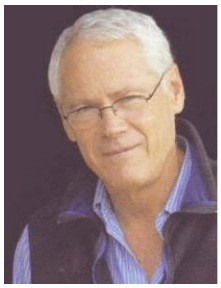

op/ed
by rob whiteley

THE GAME HAS CHANGED, NOT THE HORSE

There's been a lot of high-profile, loose talk floating around lately about how we are allegedly producing weaker, softer, more fragile Thoroughbreds. A Congresswoman from Illinois said so in a Congressional Hearing. Randy Moss announced it to the nation on ESPN. And veteran story teller Bill Nack even made up a story about it. I'm not sure what qualifies any of them to weigh in on the issue, but I know for sure that they speak from hear-say or anecdotes, and personal opinion, rather than from supportable or researched facts.

Quite a few folks lately seem to be looking at the steady decline in average starts per foal as an indication that our breeding and in-breeding practices are causing racehorses to be less "durable. " This notion is merely a simplistic, knee-jerk response without any substantive base. It is nothing more than a red herring. Based on my 25 years of experience breeding racehorses, I see no change in the horses themselves. It's *the game* that has changed. *It's what we do to and with our Thoroughbreds that accounts for the decline in average starts.* I'm thinking that our contemporary horses may even be *tougher* than earlier models to be able to hold up as well as they do despite everything we put in their way.

Speculation that in-breeding to Native Dancer, Mr. Prospector, etc., has weakened our breed is simply unsubstantiated opinion, and it is nonsense to think that we could alter the breed in a few generations. So, if the horses themselves haven't changed significantly, what else might explain the decline in average starts?

A structural analysis of how *the game has changed* points to a complex interaction of many factors which, taken together, explain the decline. One factor alone would only explain part of the decrease; but all of the factors listed below, in combination, likely account for most of the downward trend. The reader may even be able to think of additional circumstances that contribute to the drop in average starts.

First, it is important to note that average starts began to decline steadily with *the advent of year- round racing*. In the '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s, horses would typically race on a circuit and then be given a season off for rest and recuperation. They might race seven or eight months a year and spend the rest of their time rejuvenating their bodies and spirits and transitioning back into racing fitness. In our "modern" era, it seems we forget that horses are herd animals and living creatures. They are not meant to be cooped up in cell-like stalls year round. Twelve months in confinement with a brief time each day for exercise in repetitive routines is not merely tough on them physically, it is unnatural for a horse and stifling to the spirit. As thinking, feeling creatures, horses need time off to, well, *just be horses*, out picking grass with their heads down and some sunshine on their backs.

Second, and equally important, we too often substitute *veterinary intervention* for good, old-fashioned horsemanship. Race track vets have a stranglehold on many racing barns. Just look at your vet bills each month. Relying on medications and injections may get a horse to the next race, but it generally lowers the probability of getting that horse through the next six or eight. It is not surprising to most of us, therefore, that career starts have declined in an era of increasing drug use.

Third, our *emphasis on speed* in relation to two-year-old sales likely has a negative effect on the career longevity of many young horses who go through the rigors of preparing to breeze as fast as they can on a given day. Instead of bringing the babies along patiently, and within themselves, based on each horse's own developmental needs, predispositions, and time-table, we push them along on our own imposed schedule, to get a return on investment. The minority of sales horses that hold up to this regimen are testimony to the concept of survival of the fittest, and some of them go on to be major horses. But how many potential stars are compromised along the way? This Darwinian process could be easily altered to benefit buyers, sellers, and horses alike by simply returning to the previous practice of showing the babies in a strong gallop without causing them to fly through the stretch faster than most of them will ever run again. Because this current fascination with speed still reigns supreme, however, about 60% of the two-year-olds catalogued are not sold at auction, and an untold number likely have their long-term durability affected in negative ways, contributing to the decline in average career starts.

Fourth, *trainer stats* have been published for about 15 years, causing trainers' reputations to be judged in part by their win percentage. Thus, some trainers, wishing to maintain an edge in public perception and recruitment of horses, pick their spots very carefully and sometimes scratch a horse when they don't like their chances, in order to protect their win percentage. When a horse is scratched, it typically has to sit out for several days before it can be entered again for another race, thereby causing more wear and tear from training without having made another

start when it was ready. This modern phenomenon probably contributes incrementally to the overall annual reduction in starts.

Fifth, economics figure heavily into the puzzle. Just chart the 40-year average cost of Thoroughbreds against the decline in average starts and you will see that as investment cost goes up, average starts go down in an inverse or similarly linear way. The inference here is that one way *the game has changed* is that managers and trainers *protect the investment*. Clearly, expensive foals race less today, and cheaper foals race more. This is fully supported by recent *Blood-Horse* research data which show that, during the last decade, foals by stallions with a stud fee of $50,000 or more started 20% fewer times than foals by stallions with fees from $10,000 to $50,000. Furthermore, average starts per foal in the latter group were 17.8, not that far from the 20.4 of the 1970s.

Our sport is not unique in the way the game has changed to protect investment. Take Major League Baseball, for example. In the '70s, Major League pitchers typically pitched 300 or more innings per year and it was commonplace for a starter to throw 200 pitches in a game. Today, in an era of expensive ball players and huge investment, pitchers average closer to 130 – 140 innings per year and managers often yank their starters when they approach 100 pitches. Are pitchers softer or more fragile today? Not likely. The economics and logistics of the game have changed, and some of the change occurs to protect a large investment. I don't hear anyone blaming the pitchers' Moms and Dads (or great-great grandfathers) because their boys' pitch counts have declined from those in the '70s.

Sixth, given the *steadily rising costs of training* and the gouging nature of veterinary charges, the annual expense of keeping a horse in training ($30,000 -50,000+) enters heavily into the average starts equation. The influence of economics on the decline in average starts is especially influential because purses are declining when adjusted for inflation. Thus, many "modern" owners are quicker than their historic counterparts to pull the plug on their horses in training, thereby shortening their careers if they are not sufficiently productive. Owners of well-bred fillies, for example, will typically try them a few times to see if they have potential to earn black type, but will retire them early to be broodmares if they are not measuring up and paying their way. This aspect of the changing game is even more noticeable and dramatic with regard to stallion prospects who are quickly pulled from the track to the breeding shed.

Seventh, *inefficiencies* in modern condition books and the writing of races often *restrict opportunity* and, therefore, play some role in a horse's number of annual starts. As Yogi Berra might say, "They can't run if they can't start." Horses are trained on and trained on. When it is time to run, they need to run. Trainers point to a particular race in the condition book, and when the race is "not used" or their horse does not "draw in," the horse does not get to run when it is ready. Missing a race when the horse is ready to race merely produces more training, with all the wear and tear that continuous training entails. A comparative study describing the frequency of missed opportunities in the '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s needs to be conducted to assess the extent that our game may have changed to delay or postpone racing opportunity. My guess is that in the previous era, because of fewer horses and fewer races, when a horse was ready to run, it had a greater chance to race.

Obviously, a lot of complex variables are mixing and interacting together to reduce the number of starts our horses make. The economic realities of keeping a horse in training are currently so daunting, we need to identify and quickly address the causes in order to fix this serious problem. At a time when we are desperate to attract new owners and keep the ones we have, we need our horses running much more often. They can't earn money or bring sufficient excitement and joy to their owners when standing in a stall or merely working themselves into the ground while training on the track morning after morning. Meanwhile, let's focus on the real causes of fewer starts per foal, and stop trying to say it's the breeders or the breed.