



op/ed

by rob whiteley

PLEASE DON'T HIT ME AGAIN!

Are you uncomfortable with turmoil and controversy? I say, bring it on! Embrace it. Work with it. Use it. Winds of conflict also carry with them the seeds of change, and the possibility that an eventual resolution of conflict might actually produce a better circumstance.

The swirling tempest around us has blown a huge gift our way: We have become self-conscious. A large mirror has been held up and we see that, in fact, the enemy is ourselves. And, in the midst of our embarrassment, we have new energy and new urgency to look at how we have soiled our terrain, and to realize that we can only clean things up if we work together.

Certainly, we have more than a few projects to work on. Yet, no matter what we choose to tackle, we will do little more than tread water if we leave our fans out of the equation (as the Congressional Committee did recently). At a time when we are desperate to attract new fans and keep the ones we have, we should pay close attention to what our fans and the public see, and the three things that they clearly want: (1) Drug-free racing; (2) safer and more uniform track surfaces; and (3) no whipping.

With regard to the latter, I notice that The Jockey Club came out with a recommendation to modify the whip (in consultation with the Jockey's Guild), prohibit striking the horse with the arm raised above shoulder height, and to initiate inspection of damage after each race. I'm afraid that The Jockey Club members, from years of watching an established and in-grained practice, have become anesthetized to the violence of the stick and the image it projects. For sure, I think they failed to consult our fans and would-be fans.

The public does not want kinder, gentler whipping. They want to see an end to the whipping of these magnificent creatures who are made to run for our pleasure.

No question, jockey safety is paramount, and jockeys need to carry some form of whip to maintain control, and for assistance in dangerous situations. And the ability to "show the whip" or even brush the shoulder can be a significant, yet benign and acceptable, motivator. Nonetheless, the practical arguments for abolishing whipping are overwhelming.

First of all, we need to stop turning off fans and potential fans with the ugly spectacle of whipping beautiful animals. We especially need young people to build our fan base, and half of the young girls in America have an instinctive, sometimes powerful infatuation with horses. Go ask your 10-year-old daughter to watch a race and ask her what she thinks of the whipping of horses down the stretch.

Secondly, we need to recognize that whipping often has the counter-productive effect of actually interfering with performance. 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 sulk, shy, veer, or duck in or out because of whipping? How many times have you seen a horse whipped when it is totally spent and backing up, or even when it is drawing away by five?

If we go hands and heels and use a modified whip for safety only, we'll find out which jockeys have the most talent and horsemanship (meaning the best hands, communication, timing, and athleticism), and which racehorses are the most genuine. We will always have a winner, and the best horses and jockeys will still find a way to win.

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