



# op/ed

by bill finley

## RETHINKING THE CLAIMING GAME

It was a while back that Hall of Fame trainer Richard Mandella came up with an idea to help protect the horse and reduce the number of catastrophic on-track injuries. Mandella suggested that North American racing should do away with claiming races as we know them and adopt the European system in which some horses are sold or claimed after, and not before, they race. That, he contended, would remove any temptation a trainer might have to run an unsound horse in a claiming race in hopes that someone might be duped into taking them of his or her hands. If the horses are sold after the race, no one is going to buy an unsound or injured horse who may not have made it around the track in one piece.

It was a terrific idea. But, this is horse racing. Nothing ever happened.

It's that sort of inertia that has the public so frustrated when it comes to racing and the welfare of the animal. People want substantive changes and they also want more than what has been offered thus far by the industry, which includes the NTRA and a timid Safety and Integrity Alliance that won't touch tough subjects like Lasix, come out in vehement opposition to horse slaughter, or mandate minimum contributions for retirement from their certified tracks.

Mandella may not have come up with a perfect solution to the problem of unsound horses breaking down in claiming races, but he was on the right track. If the industry were truly serious about horse welfare, it would scrap a system that encourages people to run unsound horses in claimers. The easiest way to do that is to void any claims that are made on horses that break down during a race or exit the race with a substantial injury.

John Sabini is the chairman of the New York State Racing and Wagering Board, and he's also an outsider. From Queens, he occasionally visited the New York racetracks, but he spent most of his professional life in politics and was elected to the New York State Senate in 2002. When Sabini was named to head the New York racing board last August, he might have been an easy target. Here, surely, was just another political hack who knew nothing about racing and just wanted to cash a fat paycheck. That Sabini didn't have much of a background in racing turned out to be something he used to his advantage. He brought a fresh perspective to the job and refused to accept the status quo. Instead, he set out to make New York the safest racing state in the nation.

When asked recently by my co-host Dave Johnson on our "Down the Stretch" program on Sirius XM radio what he'd most like to accomplish as the chairman of the New York board, he replied: "To change the thinking of an industry that has been very slow to change on horse health. The fact of the matter is that some in this industry view the horse as a commodity. While it is something that people own and try to make money off of, the rest of the world views the horse as a living, breathing thing, and not something you should abuse to make money off of. The industry as a whole is coming along little by little, but some segments are not."

After taking a closer look at how claiming races worked, Sabini couldn't believe it when told that if an owner or trainer entered a horse and it broke down on the track, then the horse was still the property of the poor sucker who claimed it. He quickly figured out that is not only unfair, but might motivate people to run unsound horses in claimers.

"One of the things we've noticed is that the great majority of the catastrophic breakdowns in the Thoroughbred racing world come in claiming races," Sabini said. "There could be a lot of reasons for that. For instance, many of the claiming races are run at Finger Lakes or Aqueduct in the winter, when the track and racing conditions aren't at their best. But the fact of the matter is that it's hard to believe it's coincidental that there are so many breakdowns in claimers. In claiming races, if a horse doesn't finish, the person who made the claim is stuck with a horse who is injured or worse. We're looking to change that, to change the dynamic of claiming races."

Of the 19 catastrophic injuries that have occurred at the NYRA tracks this year, 12 of them have been in claimers.

What's the perfect system? In England, most races in which horses are allowed to go from one barn to another are selling races. After the race has been run, the winner is auctioned off to the highest bidder. That might work or maybe the answer is to void any claim in which a horse breaks down on the racetrack. The point is, there has to be a better way to do this, but most in the industry have been content to do nothing. That's all too typical for a sport that is still taking only the smallest steps to improve the safety and welfare of its competitors, both during and after their racing careers. Perhaps a former politician from Queens can start to change that.

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