



Op/ed

by susan finley

A MANAGED RESPONSE

I had a call this week about a horse.

Like all of the other calls, this one started with an ex-racehorse at an auction somewhere, and ended with the imminent threat that the horse would be sent off to the slaughterhouse if someone didn't step in.

It was the first call like this I've had in a while; probably since I left the board of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation last August. Back then, I would get two or three a week. I was just a volunteer; the people in the office, Diana Pikulski, got two or three a day.



Sarah Andrew photo

This time, the horse in question was a 7-year-old, bred and sold in Kentucky, who had made her debut at Keeneland, and who had gone on to win well over \$100,000. Her sire and broodmare sire were fashionable, but here she was, with a knee on her, but still beautiful, standing in the feedlot. Was there anything I could do? Was there anyone who might intervene to save her before the inevitable happened--before she was sold exactly where we all knew she'd be sold, to the slaughter guy?

I looked at her picture, at her still kind and trusting eyes; even in her current circumstances, she hadn't yet learned that people were to be feared. She certainly soon would.

There's been a lot of talk this past month about fiscal responsibility at the TRF, about a managed response to the issue, and about maintaining a manageable herd, about balancing the books and running it like a business. I think all of those arguments, and the people making them, are well-intentioned. I think that they're trying to be part of the solution, to do their part, to make sure that the bills are paid on time and that, like any good business, you only spend what you can afford to spend.

Except at its best, the TRF shouldn't be a business. It should be a rescue. It should be what racing needs, and what it was always intended to be: a safety net for those less fortunate, with nowhere else to turn. Like the mare in the sale this week.

I was on the board of the TRF for 12 years, and that was the position I always took. Save the horse, and then raise the money needed to pay for it.

So, for anyone wondering why we ended up with so many horses--and honestly, saving 100 a year of the 7,000 on their way to slaughter could only be considered "so many" by the very cynical--this is why: it's because it's very difficult to look into the face of a beautiful mare like this one this week, who did her job in the sales ring and on the racetrack, and is now facing slaughter as a reward.

We accepted so many horses because we were optimistic--because I was optimistic--that the industry would step up and accept responsibility for them, if only I could make them see why they should.

I always believed that if I explained it enough times, that if I found the proper argument for the proper person, they would understand the need, that they would come around. I argued humanity to the kind, public relations to the media-savvy, and good business to the businessmen.

And in the end, while I raised millions of dollars for the TRF in my tenure on the board, thanks to donations from a lot of you, the arguments didn't win over enough people. I don't think that made us bad businessmen. I think saving the horses the industry creates is good business. We saved the ones we could because, at the end of the day, we couldn't sleep knowing that we had been asked to play God, and we had said no to that mare at the crossroads. I'm happy to accept the blame for that.

There are a lot of good things happening in racing right now. Steroids were banned with the wave of a wand. For the first time in four decades, we're having a serious discussion about eliminating race-day medication. The annual foal crop is down to early 1970s levels, leading one to believe that those who remain will be better representatives of the breed.

Let's add one important thing to that list. Let's schedule a summit where representatives from all of racing's stakeholders--owners, breeders, horsemen, jockeys, racetracks, sales companies--will sit down and finally decide what small percentage of the pie we'll all give up to solve what is without question racing's biggest black eye.

We'll buy the mare this week, a bunch of us in the TDN office who took up a collection, led by the indomitable Sarah Andrew, who has put in more hours on this cause than anyone could count. We'll try to find her a home. But there are somewhere around 7,000 right behind her.

It's easy to turn a blind eye when the question of their slaughter is just an abstract concept. It's a little harder when you get you the call. When you hear their stories. When you look them in the eye.

That's when a managed response just doesn't quite seem enough.

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