



# op/ed

by bill finley

## CLAIM AFTER THE RACE, NOT BEFORE

When the claiming horse who had been winning for \$25,000 is in for \$10,000 after a six-month layoff, is the trainer trying to steal a purse or dump damaged goods on another stable? It's like a poker game, only these chips aren't made of plastic. They're horses and it's appalling that the very nature of the claiming game incentivizes trainers to run unsound horses in an attempt to dupe their competitors.

Fairly or unfairly, high-profile trainers Bob Baffert and Doug O'Neill have come under heavy fire recently for dropping horses in class within the claiming ranks, only to have their horses break down and be put down. They're not alone. Taking risky chances with horses in claiming races has been around forever and it's one of the ugliest aspects of the business.

Yet, as with so many things in horse racing, we have been told, "Sorry, but it's just part of the game." The industry is, thankfully, learning that that tired refrain will no longer be accepted by an American public that has had it with the sport's reluctance to clean up the mess. There are always going to be fatalities and they can happen in the Kentucky Derby as well as the \$3,000 claimer at Finger Lakes.

That's a problem, but the answer is to do absolutely everything possible to keep the horses and the jockeys safe.

And when it comes to claiming races and stopping trainers from doing something unscrupulous, there's actually an easy fix. The horses should be claimed after the race and not before.

Once a race is run, every horse that broke from the gate can be claimed within 10 minutes of the official sign being posted. No claims will be accepted before the race. That way, all incentive to run damaged horses in a claiming race has been taken away from the trainers and owners. The horse has to be fit and healthy enough to run well in the race they've been entered in. Otherwise, no one is going to claim them. If you run an unfit or infirm horse that can't perform, runs poorly, or, worse yet, gets injured it's coming back to your barn every time. So why do so?

Claiming after the race would also protect bettors. No one likes betting on a 3-5 shot that comes from a high-percentage stable that is dropping in class only to watch the horse get eased. On the flip side, no one would try to "put one over." Run a horse you know is worth \$40,000, is healthy and ready to run, for \$20,000 and you'll lose the horse every time. Trainers would be forced to enter horses where they belong.

The system in place now is like someone trying to sell a used car, but not allowing the prospective buyer to take a test drive or look under the hood. The buyer also has no recourse to return the car if it breaks down the instant he gets it on the road. Do that and a lot of people would be dumping bad cars on gullible buyers. As unimaginable as that may sound, that's exactly how claiming racing works.

In New York, which is far ahead of the pack when it comes to its proactive approach to safety and integrity issues, they've been taking steps to alleviate the problem. The claim is voided if the horse is euthanized during the race and the new owner has the option of voiding the claim if the horse must be vanned off the track. It's a start, but not enough. You can still run an infirm horse and probably get away with it getting around the racetrack without anything terrible happening to it.

With so much money out there in purses, particularly at the slots tracks, going to "cheap" horses some trainers are trying to squeeze everything they can out of a horse to win one last purse. That creates problems, problems that haven't gone unnoticed in the general media.

Like with so many things in racing, there is no magic bullet when it comes to fixing the problems the claiming game creates. The answer isn't to get rid of them. They're an excellent way of making races good, competitive betting events. The answer is to create a better system, one that takes the game-playing out of the equation.