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by bill finley

THE REAL PROBLEM WITH LASIX? *By Bill Finley*

Does Lasix cause horses to race less often?

Forget about racing's image, the weakening of the breed, how Europeans view our sport, should it be part of the Breeders' Cup, even whether or not the drug is effective in treating bleeders. The question that needs to be debated and answered is whether or not the drug has created a horse that cannot race as often as its predecessors from pre-Lasix times. If it has, the economic effects on the sport have been devastating.

Something has happened to the modern race horse. In 1975, really not that long ago, horses raced on average 10.23 times per year. In 2011, the latest year for which figures are available, the number was down to 6.20. That's a reduction of nearly 40 percent and a 40% reduction in starts is economic calamity for people who own race horses. If the horse that is now racing six times a year and earning \$100,000 would instead race 10 times a year and earn \$167,000, imagine how much better off the average owner would be.

Plus, trainers would make more money, horses would be more in demand, the sales would be up, and breeders would do better.

And imagine how much better the betting business would be. The fact that horses race less often is killing handle. The bigger the field, the more people will bet. It is an irrefutable formula, and the industry has come to realize that an overabundance of small fields means a poor product and that bettors flee when they are consistently served up bad racing and lousy betting cards.

In 1975 the average field size was 8.82 horses per race. In 2011 the number was down to 8.04. It would have been a lot worse had tracks not adjusted their schedules and reacted to a horse population made up of soft horses. But even a drop of .78 horses per race is significant.

In 2011 Doug Reed, the director of the University of Arizona Racetrack Industry Program, made a study of the effects of field size on handle and came up with some illuminating numbers. He compared 1990 figures (when horses made 7.94 starts per on average) versus 2010 numbers (when horses made 6.1 starts per year on average). He concluded that if horses started as often in 2010 as they did in 1990 average field size would rise from 8.2 starters per race to 10.6 starters.

That, he says, would cause total handle to increase by 16 to 22 % per race.

There are plenty of ways to dissect the numbers, but every one of them adds up to the fact that horses starting so infrequently these days has a negative impact on handle.

Back to the question, is Lasix behind the steep decline in the number of average starts a horse now makes each year versus 30 years ago? That's not easy to answer, but there is plenty of evidence out there to suggest that the drug has at least played a part in the increasing fragility of the animal.

The average number of starts per year figure was relatively stable up to 1975. Then something abruptly happened. From 1975 to 1985, the figures plummeted from 10.23 to 8.28, a 19% decrease over a 10-year period. Nothing like it has happened before or since. Is it just a coincidence that that 10-year period is when Lasix was introduced to the sport and began to proliferate?

I am neither a veterinarian nor a trainer, but maybe you don't have to be to understand what Lasix does to a horse. In this case, common sense goes a long way. Lasix dehydrates a horse and causes a significant weight loss prior to a race. Under these conditions, a horse is sent out and asked to give a maximum effort. It stands to reason the Lasix-treated animal cannot bounce back quickly.

Owner and anti-Lasix advocate Bill Casner wrote a letter to the *TDN* in January in which he described the difference he observed in horses' recovery time with and without Lasix. He wrote, "I have evolved into a non-Lasix/Bute owner because I strongly feel it is in the best interest of my horses. Most current owners and trainers have never raced in a jurisdiction that did not allow race-day Lasix. Many have never had a horse start without it. I do have the luxury of having experienced both sides of the coin. I trained horses in my youth in the transition era when most states did not allow Lasix. My horses performed consistently and ran on a two-week start schedule. With the science that I have read, including the South African study, and with the observations that I have accumulated over the years, I have personally made the choice to run my horses without Lasix. Why? Because I believe it is the humane thing to do for my horses. My decision is rewarded by the way they pull up after a race--they are in the tub, they drink minimal water post-race, they lose negligible weight, and they are happier and more energetic the day after. The manufacturer gives a litany of "recognized" side effects

(<http://www.drugs.com/sfx/lasix-side-effects.html>). Would anyone be so naive to think that all horses are completely immune to any of these side effects? It is a drug. Significant weight loss is another side effect.

I wanted to know how much weight horses actually lose in a race with and without Lasix. We started weighing all the horses the morning of their race and morning after. The results were eye-opening. Horses had lost as much as 100 pounds the morning after, with the average around 35 pounds, and this was after hydrating all night. The hotter the day, the more they would lose.

It would sometimes take horses three to four weeks to regain the weight. Horses running without Lasix have negligible weight loss the following morning--generally 5 to 10 pounds"

The number one argument from the pro-Lasix crowd is that the drug controls bleeding and that to force horses to run without it is asking for unnecessary trouble. Credible studies have in fact shown that the medication is effective when it comes to bleeding, so maybe there is something to their point. But they fail to take into account the long-term or overall effects of the drug on the horse. If someone found a drug that instantly cured the common cold but put you at a serious risk of cancer no one would be foolish enough to take the cold medication.

That our horses race so infrequently has been crippling to the owner and the economic health of the industry. Is Lasix the cause? I don't exactly know, but it's the one question that has to be asked and has to be answered before the sport can properly settle this debate.

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