



DEBUNKING COMMON ARGUMENTS FROM THE HORSERACING INDUSTRY

When racehorse trainers, breeders, owners and supporters of horseracing are faced with criticism of the industry, they use a lot of the same arguments to defend their practices. But are these arguments valid and what does science say?

Here are 10 arguments frequently used by the horseracing industry - and our response.

1: “Horses are born to run, they love it”

Horses will naturally seek to preserve their energy and other than an occasional short, playful spurt, they will avoid any unnecessary exertions. Yes, horses are prey animals, and they are capable of running very fast in order to escape from predators. But while there are no threats, free-roaming horses spend the majority of the day resting and grazing. You may be accustomed to beautiful pictures of wild horses running across the plains, but photographers wait around for days to capture those rare shots.

However, when you domesticate horses and confine them to stalls where they can't walk around and graze, and you replace their natural low-sugar forage diet with buckets of high-energy grains, you can create a very different animal who's desperate to expel the excess energy. Combine that with the threat of a whip and you've got the customized horse you claim, 'loves to run'.



2: “Racehorses are so excited to race the handlers can barely hold them”

What humans might see as excitement in a horse in the parade ring before a race – raised head and tail, neck tossing, flared nostrils, sidestepping or running on the spot – is more likely to be misinterpreted signs of fear and anxiety. Every single aspect of racing is unnatural and stressful to a horse. The noise, the crowd, the close proximity to unfamiliar horses who are equally as scared, and the sharp pressure from the metal bit in the horse’s mouth preventing him from acting out his natural flight response will only exacerbate the panic.

Horses also have excellent memory and recognise places and situations that has previously caused them pain. As such, even if a horse over time has learned to cope with the stress of being at the races, the horse will respond with conflict behaviour from the mere anticipation of what comes next – being whipped to run his heart out with no way of escaping.



3: “We know horses love racing as they continue to run even when the jockey falls off”

The fact that a racehorse will keep running after he or she has lost the rider is a pure result of horses’ strong instinct to always stay with the herd. If left behind by themselves, horses are unprotected and extremely vulnerable to predators, and they will do pretty much anything to get to the safety of the herd – especially in stressful, frightening situations such as racing.

As an example of just how strong the horses’ herd mentality is, you only need to watch how racehorses even after an entire limb has snapped, will continue to hobble on in a last, desperate attempt to keep up with the herd. How the racing industry can even imagine exploiting this utter desperation to defend their practises is beyond belief.

4: “Racehorses are athletes, they won’t run well if they’re not happy and healthy”

Horses can certainly be forced to perform despite being neither happy nor healthy. Horses are masters of disguising and enduring enormous amounts of pain. This is part of horses’ natural survival instinct, as showing weakness makes them an easy target for predators. Bleeding from the lungs (EIPH) can be found in up to 95 percent of racehorses after a race and up to 90% of racehorses are suffering from painful gastric ulcers. These horses still race and some still win. Racehorses that are trained brutally with electric shock devices, beaten with whips and have their sensitive tongues tied to their bottom jaw, are still racing and some still win.

The difference between a human athlete and a horse is that most human athletes have initiated participating in the sport themselves. Human athletes also have the freedom to stand up against poor treatment and have the option to quit if they can’t cope with the physical or mental pressure from it. Racehorses, although considered athletes too, don’t have those privileges.



5: “We are not forcing them, some horses refuse to race”

It is true that some racehorses suddenly refuse to move despite best efforts from the jockey to get the horse going. These horses are most likely experiencing what is known as ‘Learned Helplessness’, which is defined as a psychological condition whereby individuals learn they have no control over unpleasant or harmful conditions, their actions are futile, and they are helpless.

This is the last line of defence from a horse and is one of the most devastating scenes to witness. The horse has realised that the torture will continue no matter what he or she does, and shuts down mentally from the surrounding world. No matter how hard you repeatedly kick a horse in this state of mind, how much you beat or whip them, they have given up the fight and will stand and take the beating.

6: “Horseracing is the livelihood of thousands of people, do you want to destroy that?”

That is a very poor argument for keeping an industry going as inherently cruel as horseracing is. We learn, we get wiser, and we move on, as we have done many times in history. Humans used to employ other humans as slaves. We don't do that anymore. It used to be legal for teachers to strike the school kids for not doing their homework. That's not legal anymore. Animals didn't used to be recognised as cognitive, sentient beings by law - but now they are, in a growing number of countries and states around the world including Australian.

If you love racing, get into race cars. If you love gambling, bet on football. If you love horses, don't exploit them to make money, just love them.

7: “We spend thousands of dollars on caring for the horses, it's only fair they do some work in return”

Working to pay for food and rent is a concept constructed by humans. Horses, and all other animals for that matter, have not signed in on that deal. When living in the wild, animals are perfectly capable of providing for themselves. When we take away the horses' natural habitat and domesticate them, it is our moral duty to care for them and they should not be expected to pay by doing jobs that cause them pain and suffering.

Horses are already paying a high price for domestication being subject to our management and have their freedom to roam, forage and choose their own paddock mates taken from them. They did not ask to become our possessions.

8: “We treat our horses like kings and queens, they have more luxuries than we do”

There is no research to support that horses appreciate the same luxuries as humans do. Horses do not care much for being wrapped in blankets, getting shampooed or being locked up in a 'private room' in a stable. Even though expensive health supplements and body massages sound luxurious to most humans, horses find more pleasure in a nice roll in the dust. In fact, although we have worked for centuries to adapt horses to the human environment, domestic horses still prefer to live freely like their wild ancestors.

You might be protecting your investment by not allowing paddock time with other horses, which could potentially result in an injury and jeopardise the upcoming race, but you are not doing the horses any favours by protecting them from acting out their natural behaviours. Other than receiving veterinary treatments when sick or injured, horses do not benefit from what we consider living like kings and queens.

9: "We love our horses, they're like family to us"

When people in the horseracing industry claim that their horses are loved like family members and equally as valuable to them, they must have an unusual stance on the concepts of love and family. Most people wouldn't 'rehome' members of their family when they are not considered useful anymore, nor the family members that have been born with a defect making them unsuitable to race, or the mothers who have become too old to breed more babies.

Some breeders and owners might hang on to a few of their very best racehorses, but what about the rest of their beloved family members? CPR undercover investigations have revealed that around **5000 racehorses are being sent to slaughter each year** in Australia. With 13,000 thoroughbred racehorses born every year, there are simply too many in order for them all to find a loving home to retire in.

10: "What about the many other animals that are neglected and mistreated, why is it okay for them and not for us?"

It can't be an argument for abusing racehorses that others are abusing their animals too. That certainly doesn't make it either right or fair. Quite the opposite. Neglecting and mistreating animals is wrong, no matter who does it.

If the horse racing industry think it's unfair to be called out for animal abuse when others do it too, they should clean up their own path and join the fight to end mistreatment of animals wherever it occurs.

