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They're Dying at the Finish : Horses, Including Ex-Thoroughbred Racers, Are Being Slaughtered for Big Profit; Some Travel Long Hours in Grueling Conditions

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Just up the road from an affluent community in Chino Hills, under a blazing sun, a man in a baseball cap loads horses for transport to slaughter.

Some of the animals move slowly, the result of old age or injuries, but others are obviously well-conditioned, thoroughbreds fresh off the track.

The ranch hand continues loading until 46 horses fit in the double-decker truck designed to transport cattle and pigs, animals smaller than horses. The horses will travel in these close quarters as far as Texas, to one of the 10 USDA-inspected equine slaughterhouses. Eventually, they will be sold for human consumption in Europe and Japan.



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Many in the racing industry are unaware of the market for horse flesh, and of the ones who know, many assume the slaughter-bound horses are not their horses, that somehow the ones that go are lesser in class. But neither an impressive pedigree nor a winning race record provides an exemption.

Proud Duke, a bay son of Splendid Courage, earned \$143,350 racing four years in Southern California. In the end, he boarded a cattle truck in Chino Hills and was slaughtered in Ft. Worth. Wine Girl, by Debonair Roger, earned \$104,485 at the races, delivered a couple of foals and was sent to the holding pens to await shipment.

Broodmares carrying expensive foals are likewise non-exempt. In the last year, mares in foal to Habitony, who sired Breeders' Cup Classic contender Best Pal, and Olympic Native, who stands for \$3,500, were found at the holding pens.

The scene occurs with startling familiarity. The horses crowd onto the truck. Some begin pawing the metal floor and biting each other. Others stare out from between the slats. Mares, stallions and geldings all file in together, standing shoulder to hip and nose to

haunches for the 18-hour journey. Before they even begin the trip, their coats are washy with sweat and one appears to be bleeding from the mouth.

The ranch hand says a few words to the driver, and the truck leaves. Then it's back to the pens to rearrange the horses still waiting. The 46 on the truck will travel without food, water or a break to the Beltex Corporation's meat-packing plant in Ft. Worth. There they will each receive a bullet in the head as required by the Humane Slaughter Act.

The man loading the truck works for Leonard Grenier, owner of about 20 acres in Chino Hills that serve as a last stop for many horses. He could just as easily work for Slim Hart of Hart's Livestock in Corona.

Both Grenier and Hart, who head the only two operations in Southern California that provide horses to slaughterhouses, buy the animals from a variety of sellers. They get back yard horses at the weekly local auctions and thoroughbreds at the sales that cater to the racing community. Many times they don't have to venture out. People from the tracks, local farms and lay-up facilities, where horses are sent to recuperate, sometimes bring the animals to the two ranchers.

The former racehorses Hart and Grenier buy are often thoroughbreds who were not expected to win or runners who were injured beyond recovery. And because the meat buyers can only use live animals, there is incentive to keep horses alive until they go to the slaughterhouse. Injured animals that might otherwise be given a lethal injection at the track--and sent for autopsy as required by California law--are kept alive and sent to Grenier's or Hart's ranch.

The animals who come from the farms can be injured runners, barren mares, crooked babies or horses whose owners didn't pay the board bill. For Grenier and Hart, they are simply horses selling at a lower price than the per-pound prices the slaughterhouses will pay.

Grenier, a lifelong horseman and a racehorse owner, evaluates the animals on his lot to determine if they can be sold as saddle horses or anything more profitable than slaughterhouse horses.

Like backstretch workers at the track, Grenier is up early and spends long hours seven days a week with his horses. He said he loves the four-legged creatures.

“You can’t do this if you don’t,” he said.

Grenier is constantly evaluating, buying, selling, breeding, talking about and caring for horses.

But mostly, it’s buying and selling. He still remembers why he began shipping horses to slaughter in the early 1970s.

“I remember the day a man told me he’d pay 20 cents a pound. It was like someone telling you they were going to hand you \$100,000 tomorrow,” he said.

He’s a horse trader and loves the action. At a recent two-day horse sale, Grenier stood near the bid spotter for the length of the auction each day. From his perch on the railing, he watched 425 horses enter the ring. He bid on many and finally bought 12.

His competitor, Donna Hart, bought eight. Slim Hart, Donna’s husband, did not return repeated calls for comment on this story.

“It’s a last resort when they’re shipped for canners,” Grenier said. “A lot of them don’t ride.”

The slaughterhouse is more than a last resort; it has become the bottom of the market. Any horse that might sell for less than the slaughterhouse will pay becomes worth more dead than alive.

A riding school or back yard breeder who might have bought a thoroughbred off the track for \$200 is now being outbid by Grenier and Hart.

And for racehorse owners who think about keeping a non-racing thoroughbred, the cost of the alternative, maintaining the horse, is greater than the opportunity cost of a missed sale. There are boarding bills, veterinarian bills and training bills, if the horse is sound. Day rates for boarding a horse at California farms run from \$6 to \$16 a day for broodmares. Horses that are recovering from injuries and need extra attention are, on the average, \$8 more, according to an industry newsletter.

A horse with a bowed tendon that requires six months off could cost \$4,320 in boarding bills alone. And then there is no guarantee the horse will ever earn a check if it returns to the track.

Even “humanely destroying” an animal has its costs.

“If you have money to put them down, there’s nothing wrong with doing that,” Grenier said. “But how many people have money to do that?”

“Putting them down costs a couple hundred dollars, and then by the time you have them hauled away . . . what are you going to do? That, or take the \$500, especially if you’ve no attachment to it?”

And for Grenier, Hart and the meat-packers who deal in equine slaughter, the horse trade makes sense on the bottom line. A full-grown thoroughbred weighs anywhere from 900 to 1,300 pounds. The slaughterhouses pay up to \$1 a pound. California Thoroughbred Sales and Barretts, the two companies that cater to the state’s racing industry, set the baseline price for recent horse sales at \$500.

For a horse trader who buys a horse for \$600 at a Tuesday auction, as Grenier did, and has a truck lined up for the next Tuesday, the result may be \$400, less a week’s feed.

That's on one horse. Send 46 each week and the profits climb with the volume.

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There is no market for horse meat in the United States, but demand for it is strong in other regions of the world. Last year, the value of American horse meat exported exceeded \$128 million. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 243,585 horses were slaughtered in this country for human consumption elsewhere. Another 46,494 were transported to slaughterhouses in Canada.

In 1992, the American equine slaughter industry sold horse meat at an average of \$1.38 a pound. And the steaks eaten in France and Japan were not the only parts sold.

“Essentially, almost all the by-products are used in one shape or form,” said Robin Lohnes of the American Horse Protection Assn. “They go for pet food; the bone meal can be used in fertilizer, and the hides go to leather products.”

While the USDA inspects every horse that is slaughtered for wholesomeness and safety--last year fewer than 1% were rejected--the agency does not record the numbers of each breed going through the slaughterhouses.

“They make more money on animals with smaller bones,” said Sharon Johnston of Horsepower International, a lobbying organization. “There are different grades of horse meat, and thoroughbreds are a higher grade usually because they are younger animals.”

Johnston, however, is more concerned with the treatment of the slaughter-bound animals before they are killed. Only the method of slaughter is federally regulated, and California law does not address transportation and treatment of horses.

A bill drafted by Horsepower International, AB2039, would establish regulations for the shipment of horses to slaughterhouses. Among the requirements: Horses must be able

to stand upright with the head above their withers; stallions and mares must travel separately; mares cannot be shipped in their last trimester, and to prevent transport of crippled horses, the bill requires that animals be able to bear weight on all four legs.

The bill was signed by Gov. Pete Wilson and takes effect Jan. 1. Another bill, AB1809, was designed to ban the tripping of horses by the legs for entertainment or sport. The bill died in committee, and *charro rodeos* continue.

Grenier rents some of the horses awaiting shipment to these rodeos, in which horses are used in the roping events. Instead of catching the cattle by the horns, the rope is thrown out to catch a frightened and galloping horse by the front legs. The roper then pulls the horse's legs out from beneath and drops the animal to the dirt.

These animals are rented at a daily rate. After a few turns through the rodeo circuit, they are shipped for slaughter.

But, again, this route is a last resort. Grenier tries to sell what he can at a higher price before shipping them, but not to the point of conflict with the Texas-bound trucks.

The shipping company charges him the same amount whether the two-tiered truck is full or not. It's in Grenier's best interest to send as many as are needed to meet the maximum allowable weight of 47,000 pounds.

Eva Marina, Kim Kircher and Helen Meredith operate the Pegasus Foundation, a nonprofit organization designed to rescue as many horses as possible from slaughter and the cross-country journey that must precede it. California law prohibits the slaughter of horses for human consumption.

Marina, an artist's representative, trained horses in her native Sweden before emigrating to Southern California. Kircher is a lifelong horse enthusiast who joined Pegasus after hearing a radio announcement for one of the group's early fund-raisers.

Meredith trains horses at Santa Anita with her husband, Derek. Breeders' Cup Sprint winner Cardmania is in their shedrow.

The three women have a friendly relationship with Grenier and a more strained one with the Harts.

Grenier gives them free access to his feed lot, and almost every day one of the three is there, searching through the dusty pens trying to determine which horses can go to new owners. They use the Chino ranch as a showroom of sorts, bringing prospective buyers out to look at the horses. The buyer then negotiates directly with Grenier.

Grenier readily agrees that the women do good work, acknowledging: "They sell horses that I wouldn't have been able to sell a few years ago." But they also are doing his work for him, and their clients pay more than Beltex.

Often, Grenier will hold a horse out for them, moving it from the main pen to one of the stalls behind his office. But if he has to fill a truck, anything not sold is at risk.

Eventually, the members of the Pegasus Foundation hope to buy or lease a training center where they can keep horses while they look for new owners. If they had the space to board horses, they could offer trainers and owners an alternative to these kinds of equine way stations--sometimes called feed lots. With Pegasus' nonprofit status, anyone who donates a horse to the foundation could take a tax write-off worth more than the price Grenier and Hart will pay.

Earlier this year, Marina and Meredith discovered a gelding who appeared to be in good health. Flipping up the lip and jotting down the tattoo number gave them access to more information. It turned out the gelding, named Wishful Thinker, was in perfect physical condition.

Fabio Nor, a trainer known for feeding his horses lettuce and bottled water, and generally babying his animals, was shocked to discover that a horse he trained had ended up at the feed lot.

As a racehorse, Wishful Thinker didn't show much promise or even any reason to continue in training, so Nor gave him to a small breeder. The horse was sent to stud for a couple of years until the man couldn't keep him anymore and called Nor to return the horse.

Nor gave Wishful Thinker to a driver for Hubbard Horse Transportation, who gelded the horse and planned to use him for roping cattle. That didn't work out, so the van driver sold Wishful Thinker to a riding stable.

Pegasus found the horse at Grenier's lot waiting for the next truck to Texas.

"I was surprised when Helen (Meredith) called," Nor said. "I don't want any of my horses to go to the killer. I'll turn them out somewhere if I have to."

Sometimes the route from racetrack to feed lot is more direct. Pegasus' efforts also turned up a bay thoroughbred colt who seemed healthy except for a suspiciously tight bandage on his leg.

This colt was a 3-year-old named Three Mike's. He won his last start on April 17 at Santa Anita to cap an 11-race career. In his first start, eight months earlier, he was a half-length winner at Del Mar. When Pegasus found him, he had earned \$25,950.

Three Mike's broke a cannon bone during a morning workout, ending his racing career. Craig Lewis, who trained the Interco colt, said he discussed it with the owners and told his foreman to give the colt away.

Lewis said he was surprised and upset to hear the colt was found in the slaughter-bound pen at Grenier's. He thought he had given the horse to a good home, that after recovering, Three Mike's would be a riding horse.

Lewis said to work the hours it takes to be a trainer, you have to love horses and don't want to see them slaughtered.

"Most of my owners feel the same way I do," he said. "They don't care if they give it away. They just don't want it butchered."

Pegasus rescued Three Mike's from Grenier's and found a new home for him as a riding horse. Upon seeing the X-rays, the new owner's veterinarian had suggested the horse be killed because of the severity of the injury, but he was overruled.

Other trainers see the slaughter industry as a necessary evil. Racing is a money-making venture, and training and owning are businesses with a bottom line. Local trainer Byron Allen sells openly and often to Grenier and Hart.

"I sell to those boys because they've always got a market," he said.

Allen keeps a band of 40 broodmares and is always culling the offspring that won't make it at the races, often taking young, healthy animals directly to the feed lots.

"Obviously if you're in this business, you do it because you love horses," he said. "You don't do it because you want to sell them for dog food."

But, Allen added, he can't keep all the horses he raises.

"It would get to a point where the people who want to do good by their horses can't, because they've got too many to feed," he said. "If you keep all the bad ones, you can't do right by the good ones."

But if the good ones are the ones who earn their keep, thousands of horses born each year don't count. In 1989, the Jockey Club registered 48,196 thoroughbred foals. Last year, as 3-year-olds, only 53% had made it to the races, according to *The Bloodhorse* magazine, and the number of horses in training from that foal crop will continue to drop as they grow older.

The magazine estimated an owner's annual cost to be \$20,000 per horse. Using that as a break-even point, only about 11% earned their keep.

In other words, from a foal crop of 48,196, only 2,809 earn the owner's cost back, fewer than 6%.

Although Pegasus is a new group, Marina has been rescuing horses for four years. By her estimates, she has helped rescue more than 200 from the agonizing trip and death at the slaughterhouse. But then, Grenier can ship as many as 46 horses per week. And Hart might ship more.

Pegasus also started a "die with dignity" program for the horses who were too far gone when discovered at the feed lots. One crippled mare was unable to fight for her share of food in the crowded pen. Pegasus bought her from Grenier and had a veterinarian administer a lethal injection to the skinny and sore chestnut mare.

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