

Greener Pastures

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NEW HOLLAND, Pa. · Just inside the front door of the New Holland Sales Stable – past the makeshift flea market that has emerged in the parking lot between livestock vans and horse-drawn carriages – there's a carnival atmosphere surrounding the "killer buyers."

The door slams out the cool, crisp air, and streams of musty light illuminate an assault to the senses.

A man in suede tassels is hawking paintings of gaudy red sunsets, while farmers form several lines to buy cold sandwiches and ice cream from a snack stand. While a group of Amish children happily snakes its way through the crush of flannel bodies, a steady stream of horse traders walks down warped wooden bleachers to a tiny sales ring in the middle of this rickety old building.

If you can find this livestock auction house off Main Street and Custer, if you can push past the snack stand and bleachers, past the hundreds of men and women gossiping and forging deals amid the stench of cigarette smoke and manure, you'll find approximately 300 horses roped to metal pylons. Each horse has a sufficient amount of hay and water.

Some will become workhorses. Some will become pleasure horses. And some will be bought and sold this afternoon to be slaughtered.

"Bring me in another one!" screams the auctioneer.

Crowded together outside a narrow chute, slipping and sliding across manure-caked concrete, while a Humane Society officer watches, horses are ridden, sometimes raced, into the tiny auction ring and sold, usually within 30 seconds. Those that are bought as work or pleasure horses are led outside and onto waiting vans. The others, usually purchased for as little as \$300 by "killer buyers" – a term used in the industry to describe middlemen for slaughterhouses who sell the horse meat overseas – are put into a kill pen in the back of the main building.

On a recent Monday afternoon, Forever Baby, a 5-year-old bred in Florida who had raced just weeks ago at Penn National, stands near the kill pen after being purchased for \$375. On the other side of the chain-link stall housing Forever Baby, a dead pig rests in the scoop of a small tractor.

It's a long way from New Holland to the pristine sales rings of Saratoga and Keeneland.

"Bring me in another one!"

Even if War Emblem doesn't win Saturday's Belmont Stakes and

thoroughbred racing's Triple Crown, his future is guaranteed to be in rich pastures under the best of care. But for thousands of other thoroughbreds each year, the end could be New Holland, where a half-dozen "killer buyers" buy thoroughbreds and other breeds of horses before transporting them to Texas, home of the only two horse slaughterhouses remaining in the United States.

In fact, less than 24 hours before 100,000 crowd into Belmont Park to see if War Emblem can become the 12th Triple Crown winner, a thoroughbred likely will be led into a kill chute, shot in the head with a pressurized bolt, then lifted by conveyor to have its throat slashed. The horse, who can't be euthanized since the lethal injection would render the meat poisonous, is then butchered and sold to the European market for as much as \$20 a pound.

"After all these horses do for us, shouldn't they die in a humane way in an environment they're familiar and comfortable with instead of being carted off 20 hours by van to a slaughterhouse?" asks Kelly Young, whose Lost & Found Horse Rescue has saved 400 horses, including Forever Baby, from the slaughterhouse.

"The horror of putting horses through this the last four or five days of their lives ... I can't live with it," said John Hettinger, chairman of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation and Fasig-Tipton. "Some people within the [thoroughbred] industry don't want to talk about this because they don't want the adverse publicity; they think it will give the industry a black eye. But that's the equivalent of the church sweeping scandal under the rug."

Hettinger, Young, Paul McCartney – yes, Paul McCartney – aren't the only ones trying to put an end to the slaughter of horses. Rep. Connie Morella, R-Maryland, has authored the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (HR3781), a bill that would ban the export of horse meat for human consumption, thereby ending the slaughter of approximately 56,000 horses of all breeds annually in the United States.

"It's cruel and inhumane," said Morella, whose bill has 44 co-sponsors. "Some of my constituents have seen what goes on in the slaughterhouses. We have video. It's graphic."

A happier ending

Some 40 minutes outside New Holland, and just a few miles from York, Pa., off the Susquehanna Trail, Kelly Young is busy filling the feed tubs of the dozen horses residing inside a 100-year-old barn at her rescue.

"A lot of times people in the professional community think rescue people are do-gooders; people who don't have any history with horses," she said. "But I've had horses since I was 4, and I believe part of horse ownership is planning for an ending. I'm not against euthanizing a horse. What I'm against is putting a horse through slaughter."

Over the past several years, Young has saved approximately 200 thoroughbreds from an ending at slaughter. Funded by sponsors – "many like the little old lady down the street who sends \$20 each month" – Young drives to New Holland each Monday to witness the carnival and save as many horses as she can.

It is a numbing experience, especially since Young must wait until the auction is over – sometimes six hours – to find out which horses wind up in the kill pen and which killer buyers will deal with her. Forever Baby was sold to a killer buyer for \$375, but Young, acting on behalf of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF), must pay an additional \$50 to get the horse from the buyer.

Young's rescue retains ownership in every horse it adopts out. The rules for adoption are simple: Don't breed, don't race and don't resell. "We retain ownership because if anything happens to the horse when we check on them, we can legally take the horse back and put it in a more suitable situation," Young said.

In the past 10 years, Young rescued from slaughter a half-brother to Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner Charismatic for \$425 and saved a Maryland-bred thoroughbred off the killer truck at Charles Town Race Track. She's also saved more than a dozen Florida-breds, including a 9-year-old named Lakeside Park who had raced 101 times.

"The half-brother to Charismatic, Squall Watch, does dressage," Young said. "The other horse is in international competition."

Now 10 years old, the Maryland horse, a bay gelding who raced 31 times in the mid-Atlantic under a cheap claiming tag, recently placed 10th out of 48 horses at a Virginia three-day event. Jane Cory of Pleasant Hollow Farm adopted the gelding two years ago.

"He was in pretty rough shape when we got him," Cory said. "Kelly got him right off the truck. He was very skinny, he had fungus on his body and he just smelled bad. He obviously hadn't been cared for. I didn't want to ride him for a while because he was so skinny. But I liked him a lot and, obviously, he's done well.

"Who knows how many thousands of other horses don't have to go to the slaughterhouse but can go on to do other things if only given the chance?"

Young, who has roughly a dozen volunteers, also gets horses donated by owners and trainers who believe their horse might make a good pleasure animal, or who fear the slaughterhouse. Veteran thoroughbred trainer Vinnie Blengs donated a horse to Young several years ago.

"I wanted to find a nice home for a horse who had some [physical] problems," Blengs said. "Someone told me about [Young]; I called, and she said she'd pick the horse up in a few days. I got a call from her a couple months later telling me the horse had been adopted and was doing really well at the farm she was at.

"I don't know how the hell she does it, but I think it's wonderful what she does. Not only does her [rescue] always own the horse, but it doesn't go to slaughter."

Veterinarian Allen Wisner of the Green Glen Equine Center looks at many of the horses Young brings back to her rescue. Wisner said many horses are victims of ignorance; of owners not knowing how to take care of the animals. Thoroughbreds, he said, are usually at the end of their career.

"The thoroughbreds taken off the track are suffering from some infirmity that prevents them from racing ... many times arthritic problems or tendon injury," he said. "These horses are athletes, so they have to be sound and capable. Pleasure horses don't have the same stress as thoroughbreds, so they can withstand or be treated for minor problems."

After working with Young for several years, Wisner said, "Kelly has mellowed.

"Realistically, there's a lot of horses we can't do a lot with, and she's become adept at understanding what horses can be salvaged and which ones can't. That's the hardest part, asking yourself which one you can help."

On a recent afternoon, Young spent \$1,800 to purchase three horses, including a 14-year-old thoroughbred gelding headed to slaughter. When she realized a killer buyer had purchased Forever Baby, she called Diana Pikulski, executive director of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation. Pikulski told Young to buy the horse and the TRF, which cares for some 425 retired thoroughbreds nationwide, would place it at one of its farms.

"There was a time last year when we actually bought some horses from the killer's middleman," Pikulski said. "The buyers usually go from sale to sale. If the horses don't sell after a week or two, these guys will be in touch with us.

"We bought a couple of nice horses, got the name of their last owner, and then called to see if they knew what happened to their horse. A lot of the time people have no idea where their horses wind up."

Young, who ultimately hopes to get the funding to build a second rescue, has a working relationship with some of the killer buyers.

"So many people emphasize what a terrible thing the buyers are doing, but they've actually helped me track down stolen horses, which is something they didn't have to do," Young said. "They feel they're providing a service; that slaughter is a necessary evil. And they're not the ones to blame. You know, they didn't create this situation."

Conditions disputed

There were a dozen slaughterhouses in the United States just 20 years ago. Only two remain: Dallas Crown in Kaufman, Texas, and BelTex, in Fort Worth. A third, Cavel International in DeKalb, Ill., was destroyed by fire in April; the incident is under investigation.

According to Jim Weems, a spokesman for the slaughterhouses that are separately owned by Belgian companies, the two slaughterhouses employ about 250 people. So if the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act is passed, there will be a loss of jobs as well as an impact on vendors who work with the slaughterhouses.

Weems stresses that horses are slaughtered the same way as cows and pigs. And literature produced by the two slaughterhouses reads that a U.S. Department of Agriculture food safety inspector is on site every day watching over the slaughter.

The literature also stresses the importance the slaughterhouses take in keeping the horses calm before being shot by a "captive bolt" in the kill chute. The preparation of meat cuts, the literature states, is dependent on the condition of the animal at the time of slaughter. Because a stressed animal can have chemical reactions in muscles that result in the meat being "less desirable for the consumer," there is a financial incentive to keep the horse calm.

Chris Heyde, a spokesman for the Society for Animal Protective Legislation (SAPL), a lobbying organization in Washington, D.C., questions the validity of the literature. Heyde, who says he was escorted unannounced to one of the slaughterhouses six months ago, alleges he never saw a USDA representative at the facility. He added that conditions were deplorable, and dismissed the claim that horses are slaughtered the same way as other livestock.

"One has to remember that hogs and cattle are more short-necked, docile animals than horses," Heyde said. "Horses are flighty; they're put double-file into the chute and they're terrified. No one holds their head, so when they hit them with the captive bolt it's not always at the right spot. Everything is covered in feces and blood, and [the horses] can smell that."

Despite the scene Heyde depicts, there are many who believe the Horse Slaughter Prevention Act will lead to more inhumane treatment. Owners and trainers, unable to care for their horses, will neglect and abandon them. Heyde also has described what he saw on the SAPL Web site.

When presented with such an argument, Hettinger becomes emotional.

"That's absurd, and I get angry every time I hear that," Hettinger said. "There were 300,000 horses in the U.S. slaughtered 10 years ago as compared to 65,000 last year. Does that mean there are roughly 235,000 horses being neglected? I don't think so. There's plenty of ways the horses can be absorbed, so that argument offends me.

"I understand there's a difference between companion animals and livestock, but the horse is a crossover animal. They are the only domestic animal that does anything for us other than feed us. They work for us. The first thing you try to do the very first time you put a halter on them is to make them trust you. And what do we do?"

So is a thoroughbred simply livestock? Or does it cross over to companion animal once we attach a name to it and it performs for us?

"I don't know," said Ken McPeck, trainer of this year's Kentucky Derby favorite Harlan's Holiday. "I'm not sure where you draw the line."

Hall of Fame conditioner D. Wayne Lukas, who has trained 21 thoroughbred champions, asked, "What makes a horse different from a hog or a cow? We can't get our mindset to feel the same way because of our love of the horse."

But that love of the horse doesn't always translate to support for the ban on slaughter. Greg Avioli, a spokesman for the National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA), says his group is studying Morella's bill, "but we've taken no public stance pro or con." Jay Hickey, president of

the American Horse Council, and Jerry Black, president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners, did not return calls. Hickey has been quoted as saying his group is still studying the bill, while Black has been quoted as saying slaughter is "a necessary part of the industry."

Opponents of the bill say there are other problems with a possible ban on slaughter. If horses are deemed companion animals, horse farms could lose agriculture tax exemptions. There's a fear that some animal rights groups will try to ban the slaughter of cattle and other livestock. And some express fear that by pulling horses off the slaughter market, they'll create a demand for stolen horses that will be shipped to slaughterhouses in Canada or Mexico.

"Pro-slaughter people scare others with talk of tax exemptions and tax implications," Hettinger said. "I'm chairman of the largest equine research foundation, and I can tell you the government's help has been mostly inconsequential. They don't fund equine research now because the horse is not in our food chain."

What about the argument, Hettinger is asked, that many people can't afford \$300-\$500 to euthanize the horse and send it to a rendering facility?

"This argument gives a new meaning to the words 'lowest common denominator,'" he said.

While Richard Hancock, president of the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders and Owners Associations, says "there could be major repercussions" if Morella's bill is passed, he adds, "There's no doubt the [thoroughbred] industry has a responsibility to take care of these horses.

"This board has helped to build the thoroughbred retirement farm at the [Marion] correctional facility [near Ocala], and we've tried to take care of every horse as far as I know," he said. "We don't turn away any who come from the track. We realize our responsibility."

Bill wins support

Hettinger doesn't want to hear the gory details of what takes place inside the slaughterhouse. "I wouldn't be able to stand it," he said. He also isn't sure how many thoroughbreds are slaughtered, although he has been quoted as saying as many as 5,000 are sent to slaughter each year.

In an effort to stop some of the slaughter, however, Fasig-Tipton, along with five of the largest thoroughbred sales companies in the U.S., instituted a minimum bid of \$1,000 at their sales last year to prevent horses being sold to the killer buyers. Fasig-Tipton also distributed \$90,000 last year to 14 rescue agencies, including Young's Lost & Found.

Meanwhile, Morella's bill continues to pick up support, including that of former Beatle Paul McCartney, who says he finds it "horrific and slightly strange to realize that horses, traditionally man's friend, are still being transported and slaughtered for human consumption."

Morella says she's hopeful the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act "gets out of this Congress."

As for those groups who are opposing the bill, Morella says: "There are some groups we've met with who have some questions, who have some areas of concern, but we're going to do everything we can to get this passed."

Hettinger believes the general public is for the ban.

"If the American people knew what was going on, this bill would sail through," he said.

Pikulski believes the bill is "extremely important for the racehorse industry."

"People in this industry want to do the right thing," she said. "The thoroughbred industry wants people to come back to the sport. If this bill passes, people don't have to worry about where their favorite horse is going to end up.

Back at Lost & Found Horse Rescue, a world removed from New Holland, Young will spend the next several hours trying to find homes for the horses she's rescued. With only 18 stalls in her barn, it's imperative to adopt horses out so room can be made for more who may otherwise be headed to slaughter.

Young is asked if she ever hits a breaking point; if it ever becomes too much.

"People wear me down sometimes, but never the horses," she says. "Just when I think I've seen or heard it all ..."

A horse comes along like Mary, a thoroughbred Young rescued from a killer's truck who was so fragile and petrified "she wouldn't let anyone touch her," Young recalled.

"It was total sadness, she was afraid of people probably because no one had ever loved her or taken the time with her," she said. "We took her off the truck, cared for her, and now there are children riding her, and she has such a peaceful look in her eyes."

Young is silent for a moment.

"She's now doing everything every other horse should be doing, except she's not on her way to being killed."

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