



op/ed

by rob whiteley

AU CURRANT

I learned yesterday that a nine-year-old daughter of Horse of the Year Point Given out of Belmont graded stakes winner Inquisitive Look was ticketed for an imminent trip to slaughter in Canada. Her name is Au Currant and I was co-breeder. She was last seen in a sales ring at Keeneland in 2006 when sold for \$35,000 in foal to graded stakes winner Sharp Humor.

The good news is that her young and useful life has been saved at the last minute by the individual efforts of a small band of earth angels. Au Currant has been spared a death trip that would make most readers cringe if they could watch from beginning to end, up close and in person.

The bad news is that Au Currant's saga, and thousands like it, painfully expose that we still do not have an established, comprehensive safety net in place for our equine athletes and bloodstock. We use them for our gain and pleasure and then frequently objectify them as 'tools' or 'pieces' to be discarded in an often inhumane process.

We drug them, we whip them, and then we often neglect or turn away from them when we are finished using them for our enjoyment. And by not making the welfare of our horses our #1 industry priority, we sadly earn a majority of the general public's scornful perception that we are callous and uncaring.

A recent initiative in the form of the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance brings with it a glimmer of hope. The TAA has been established to provide accreditation for aftercare facilities and to raise funds to support approved facilities. To this point, the initiative has received initial lip service support and seed money from several industry groups; however, the TAA's impact will come down to one thing...real money.

Developing a safety net for the Au Currants of the world requires millions of dollars, annually, not 50K here or 200K there. We need every industry segment systematically chipping in significant monies at each stage of a horse's life cycle to a Super Fund for equine welfare.

Breeders need to pay into a Super Fund at time of registration. Breeders' Cup and state-bred programs need to kick-back a percentage of nominating fees to that Super Fund and breeders who receive award money need to do the same. Every time a horse is sold (including claims), the buyer, seller, and sales company or agent should be required to pay something to the Fund. Similarly, every individual or entity receiving revenue from a horse's racing performance should be charged a proportionally fair amount from any monies earned from each race (including owners, trainers, jockeys, race tracks, OTBs and other recipients of simulcast revenue, etc.). Bettors who make the game and the revenue possible and who are already "taxed" unfairly in the form of stifling take-out are the only group that should be exempt.

Of course, this kind of systematic effort requires our power-addicts to cooperate with one another for the good of the industry (and the horses). As with any 12-step program for addicts, however, progress starts with raising awareness to the point where we admit to ourselves and others that change is necessary and what we need to change must become our #1 priority. If we as an industry wish to grow and be healthy, we need to overcome our selfish insensitivities and join together in making horse welfare our clear-cut #1 priority.

We also need to think outside the box and approach this problem from many angles and with new thinking. For example, only the oligarchic breed registry known to us as The Jockey Club has the power to establish rules at time of registration that could follow a horse through its lifetime. Perhaps the JC could explore the possibility of placing stipulations on a foal's papers at time of issue which would require the holder of the papers at each stage to make "use" payments to a centralized Super Fund. Otherwise, the horse would not be eligible to compete in races or have subsequent produce registered.

Whether or not rescindable foal papers are feasible and no matter what ideas are created through community brain-storming, it is clearly way past time for our industry to make horse welfare THE #1 industry priority in America.

Rob Whiteley is owner of the commercial breeding operation known as Liberation Farm.

(Editor's Note: The head 'angel' in this collective effort was Robert and Case Clay's team at Three Chimneys, whose marketing director, Jen Roytz, brought our attention to Au Currant's situation, and organized for her transportation and quarantine. Three Chimneys' 'Protecting Our Own Program' is a model everyone in the industry should emulate. The industry owes them a debt of gratitude. For more on the program, click here: <http://www.threechimneys.com/protecting/> .-Sue Finley)



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