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by rob whiteley

CHECK-OFF ... AND WRITE A CHECK

The new year begins with fresh hope and an opportunity for breeders to set an important example for the industry.

As announced recently, The Jockey Club has established a "check-off" program for breeders to make *voluntary* contributions toward the care of unwanted or retired Thoroughbreds. Responding to requests from Thoroughbred Charities of America (TCA) and the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF), The Jockey Club will begin collecting monies from breeders at time of foal registration, and will distribute the funds through the TCA and TRF. Despite limited funding, both well-established programs have already made an important impact related to rescue, retraining, adoption or placement, and retirement. For its part, The Jockey Club has agreed to contribute up to \$200,000 in matching funds.

This program should clearly be *mandatory* rather than voluntary, and these monies will only be a tiny amount compared to the vast funds likely to be required because of the closing of slaughter houses at a time when our economy is in recession and our own industry is in crisis. But this is an important first step toward developing a comprehensive plan to address a serious and growing problem. Furthermore, more hope may be on the way, as TCA is currently designing an industry-wide plan for participation by all major stake holders.

Clearly, breeders who bring these wonderful creatures into the world only have a portion of the responsibility for their well being over their life-cycle. *Every group who makes money on the backs of Thoroughbreds shares an innate obligation. Stallion owners, sales companies, agents who buy and sell, racetracks, simulcast facilities, owners, trainers, jockeys, veterinarians, farriers, transporters, feed companies, and other suppliers and service providers (but not fans and bettors) all share an ethical responsibility to contribute a fair pro-rata amount.*

We need to provide adequate funding to address what will be a growing problem. And we need to do it now. Whether we view horses as livestock and as legitimate candidates for the "food chain," or as pets who should never go to slaughter, we can be united and agree on the importance of humane treatment and proper care for these special animals. Thoroughbred racehorses enrich our lives with aesthetic beauty, companionship, entertainment, joy, and at times monetary gain.

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And they allow us to project our own hopes and dreams upon them in ways that lift our spirits while giving us something exciting to look forward to. The least we can do is to do the right thing by them. We must check ourselves, check-off, and write a check.

As for speaking about doing the right thing, I find it curious that The Jockey Club is only matching "up to \$200,000." As their website proclaims, "The Jockey Club is dedicated to the improvement of Thoroughbred breeding and racing." If they truly mean what they say, I'm thinking that they should add a zero to their contribution, whether it is matched or not. Given their mission statement and expressed commitment to the industry and to the horse, it seems reasonable to think that they could and should contribute an annual amount equivalent to the compensation package of its top four employees (approximately \$2,000,000).

In this context, I was floored to learn recently that the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) registers about three times as many horses each year as The Jockey Club and charges \$25 to register a foal up to seven months of age. Even with economies of scale, the difference between the AQHA's \$25 fee and the \$200 that The Jockey Club charges breeders is staggering.

I would like to see a detailed break-down of exactly how our \$200 fee is spent by The Jockey Club. How do their costs add up to the \$200 per foal? Are we in part paying for G & A costs that sustain the *for-profit* businesses and partnerships created and run by The Jockey Club (e.g., The Jockey Club Information Systems, EquineLine, Equibase, TrackMaster, InCompass, etc.)? Are we contributing to the overhead of a posh 52nd Street, New York address? Where exactly does our money go compared to the AQHA process?

Furthermore, I'm also thinking that we and our industry's horses might be best served if The Jockey Club "spun off" or transferred its *non-profit* registry office to a horsemen's organization that could run the registry in a more cost-effective way, similar to the AQHA model. By lowering overhead and reducing the basic cost of our foal registration fee to \$50, or \$75, or even \$100, we could maintain the total registration fee at \$200 and assign the difference to the task at hand; namely, the proper and responsible care of unwanted or retired racehorses.

Meanwhile, breeders, please do what we can to set the right example. Check-off and write a check.

Comments? Please write to TDN management at suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com. Rob Whiteley may be reached through his website, www.liberationfarm.com.

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