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EDITORIAL

Out of the Gate

When the Kentucky Derby rolls around each year, few ordinary fans are aware of the grisly waste of horseflesh that underpins the self-proclaimed Sport of Kings. One of the unacknowledged traditions of racing has been wholesale neglect of glorious thoroughbreds once their competitive days are done. Notions of happily ever-aftering in the bluegrass are largely myth.

About 3,000 horses burn out each year from competing at venues far back from the bright lights of Churchill Downs. Perhaps two out of three are slaughtered as marketable horse meat, euthanized or abandoned.

Fortunately, the plight of these noble also-rans came to considerable public attention last spring when 170 malnourished and ill-treated horses owned by a prominent, successful breeder were found being neglected and readied for kill pens in upstate New York. Criminal charges of animal cruelty are pending. But more to the point of what is needed nationally, the New York Racing Association has just announced the banning of any breeder or trainer who sells horses for slaughter.

The crackdown is welcome but late in coming to a multibillion-dollar industry that can make a humane show of ministering to its celebrity champions while gracelessly relegating thousands more to destruction at the bidding of "kill buyers" who work the sport's fringe. (Even the 1986 Kentucky Derby champion, Ferdinand, was not spared slaughter in Japan once he failed as a sire, The Times's Joe Drape points out.)

As the upstate scandal spread across the Internet, equine care charities and ordinary people have been helping the victimized horses to sweet resurrection as ranch retirees and recreational companions.

They are shepherded by pioneer protective groups like the Columbia-Greene Humane Society/Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation. The foundation has been saving thoroughbreds since 1984, when it began buying horses for rural prisons, to be cared for by minimum-security inmates. "The little guy just wants to run free," one inmate said of his horse. "And I don't blame him."

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