

ALAN F. BALCH

## HORSEMANSHIP 1A



**A**nyone who has witnessed the saga of racing at Santa Anita this winter needs no repeated recitation of the facts . . . to say that the sport as we have known it is jeopardized in California, and perhaps North America, is a gross understatement. It's worth remembering that that very word—jeopardy—is derived from gaming; when a position in chess and other games is equally divided between winning and losing, there's danger.

Just how endangered we are, only time will tell.

So, of course, The Jockey Club released “a major white paper.” But like all the other stakeholders, they couldn't resist pointing at everyone else except themselves. Again we heard their self-serving, political, and self-destructive refrain that “race day” and other therapeutic medications are culprits for what ails us. They threw in unspecified “cheaters and abusers” for good measure, as though that's the public face of racing we embrace! All this, despite the simple fact that in the same state, during the same months, with the same medication rules as at Santa Anita, with the same or worse weather, another track—under the same ownership—maintained its position as one of the safest courses in America. Doubtless it escaped The Jockey Club that the all-weather synthetic surface at Golden Gate Fields was a principal factor in differentiating the two tracks!

But it hadn't escaped anyone knowledgeable in California that main track and turf maintenance at Santa Anita beginning in January, as well as management of the racing program itself, may have been seriously flawed. And that the inherent issues are far greater than any isolated, dramatic spike in serious injuries at one place.

Therefore, it's now essential, especially for the sport's leadership, to go back to the objective, unemotional truths of basic horsemanship—not self-defeating posturing—to try to see where we stand throughout the world.

From the beginning of horses in sport, which is to say at the beginning of recorded history, the objective was to breed and train a swifter, stronger, better horse. For all this innocent animal's many gifts to humankind, whether in work, commerce, war, exploration, sport, art, pleasure, or otherwise, horsemanship must begin with breeding. Responsible, logical breeding.

Racing simply demonstrated who could breed a better horse. Glory followed. And later, riches. Racing stock is the proof of breeding stock.

The Jockey Club's principal purposes are to improve the Thoroughbred breed and protect its integrity. It's the breed registry. It sets the standard for breeding. At least it should. But that's where our problems really begin, because the Thoroughbred breed is based on genotype, not phenotype. The genotype is the set of genes a horse carries, and our breed registry protects “integrity” by taking elaborate steps to be sure that there are no stray non-Thoroughbred genes in our horses. The way things are going, we might well need some!

The phenotype, on the other hand, is all of a horse's observable characteristics—its conformation, quality, substance, and soundness. Who is guarding or enhancing the conformation, quality, substance, and soundness of our Thoroughbreds? Apparently not the breed registry! The next “white paper” we need to see from The Jockey Club about “reform” needs to take a deep, honest look at best practices for breeding, foaling, nursery, and every medication or veterinary practice that gets a Thoroughbred sold, whether or not in the auction ring and beyond. Any breed registry that permits, tolerates, or encourages the breeding of unsoundness to unsoundness is not breeding a better horse, that's certain. Nor should the registry turn a blind eye to any cosmetic or medicinal practice that could possibly compromise substance or soundness.

If the registry will concentrate on the true integrity of the breed—its soundness—it won't need to waste nearly so much breath on the conduct of others.

Those of us who grew up in non-racing horse sport all remember The Sportsman's Charter. It proclaims that sport ceases when it becomes a business only, something done for what there is in it. “The exploitation of sport for profit alone kills the spirit and retains only the husk and semblance of the thing.” I believe this is exactly what's been overtaking racing, killing it, for decades now.

There's a reason that Keeneland and Saratoga and Del Mar succeed and inspire: their profits are turned back into the sport. They race limited seasons of the highest quality. They don't exist for return on investment, except for the sport itself. But The Jockey Club boasts of its “group of commercial, for-profit subsidiaries and commercial partnerships.” Presumably those profits should benefit the sport. Do they, if protection of live cover, stud fees, auction prices, unsound pedigrees, and bloodstock profiting are weakening the breed? Do they, if their own professional journalists are muzzled? Do they, if their contributions to the U.S. Congress are wasted on the fool's errand of banishing Lasix?

**BELOW:** Capriole, the most difficult of the airs above the ground, jumping straight up from a standstill with raised forehand, requiring enormous equine power and precision horsemanship to train.



SPANISH RIDING SCHOOL