

ALAN F. BALCH

IS THIS HERD SAFE?

IN SHORT, NO, IT ISN'T.

And it's long past time for racing's leaders to recognize the overwhelming threats to the sport and act decisively and intelligently. Up to now, every monumental effort we've made has, in reality, been only a half-measure.

Month after month, the California Horse Racing Board has been under siege by a small band of "animal rights" extremists. By extension, so has our Governor's Office, and several local jurisdictions as well. Not too long ago, authorities in New York were similarly besieged, as were United States Senators and members of Congress. Key editorial boards and journalists of American newspapers are constantly surrounded and pummeled by well-organized and funded opponents of racing who detest our livelihoods. Important radio and television broadcasters in racing markets, and nationally, not to mention legislators in almost every state where racing is conducted, are all under the same gun. Then there's "social media" – don't get me started on that fount of misinformation and misdirection.

While I've touched on this issue in these pages before, without noticeable effect, let's be even more explicit. If racing's leadership doesn't now organize and fund what's needed to be done for many years, the battle to protect and advance racing will be hopelessly lost. If it isn't already.

We take for granted the most elementary aspects of basic horsemanship, and we shouldn't. A reporter recently contacted me with an allegation received from an activist that "these horses are in their 12' by 12' stalls 23 hours a day. They're confined most of their lives. It's kind of like a prisoner in solitary confinement. You let them out for one hour, they're going to go crazy. They're going to exercise, they're going to run around, they go insane. So that's what these horses do. You let them out of their stalls, and you line them up and you put them in the starting gate. Of course, you open up that gate, they're gonna run like hell because they've been locked up all day."

So, the reporter innocently (and seriously) asked me, "Can you speak to this point? Is this an accurate claim or is this false or an exaggeration?"

First, understand clearly that such an allegation, however false, sounds entirely



plausible to anyone unfamiliar with basic horsemanship. In other words, it's taken seriously by probably 95% of the general population, or even more! Including, by the way, the aforementioned editorial boards, politicians, journalists, broadcasters, and social media addicts. Who receive other such accusations constantly.

As a horse-crazy marketer at heart myself, I trace our failings back a long way ... to the increasing abandonment of promoting on-track attendance, which coincided with the advent of Advance Deposit Wagering and simulcasting before it. I have always felt that selling our gaming at the expense of the horses and sport was suicidal, since no sport can compare with ours, but every other game can. Continually emphasizing the game detracts dangerously from the horse, the essence of our sport. Its unique selling proposition.

The "animal rights" activists sense this. They are accomplished strategists. Their appetites have been whetted as they have learned from their own case studies that precede us: fashionable furs, elephants at the circus, and orcas at marine parks. Which, in truth, are all importantly different from racing. Lately, their approach to racing is two-fold: people really don't need horses to bet on (because there's historical racing in the first place, and plenty of other ways to bet). Real horses are miserably abused and killed when they should be running free. Or, more logically, not bred in the first place.

Racing's wealth has been spent (wasted?) so far on defense, often taking positions that actually worsen our public reputation. The Jockey Club has devoted a fortune to advancing anti-Lasix legislation that has fed and even emphasized a false narrative that race horses are unconscionably drugged. Some tracks have pursued advertising campaigns that even call attention to breakdown statistics in the name of improving safety, thus affirming



our attackers. "Crisis management" firms have largely failed, it would seem, at enormous and often counter-productive expense.

Understanding our opponents and their goals is key. Then we must take

the offensive to save our sport. All the while continuing and increasing ever more effective efforts to breed and race and enhance soundness in our horses.

We are confused when the "animal rights" extremists don't respect or appreciate our efforts to improve animal welfare. We shouldn't be. To them, the two concepts are fundamentally incompatible. To a human who believes that any ("other") animal is equivalent to a human, that it is therefore entitled to express its informed consent before undertaking any activity, the very concept of human husbandry of animals is moronic. To the true believers, the extremists who drive opposition to racing, no animal can be raised or processed for food or any byproduct. No animal can be a pet. No animal can be farmed, meaning bred, for any purpose at all. Their informed consent is literally impossible.

Moreover, these extremists seek to impose their own beliefs and conduct on all the rest of us, while secretly ridiculing and marginalizing any effort to improve animal welfare. Let us recognize that only the tiniest fraction of the public would support such extreme views, if their motives were understood. Nor would the public accept such a draconian restriction on the freedom of others, if they knew what was at stake.

When that reporter posed those questions to me, I thought about how stables had evolved over thousands of years, for the safety, protection, happiness, and well-being of our herds. We owe it to them, and to our sport, to convene the brightest minds and deepest pockets we have, all together, to develop effective strategies, using the most modern methods, to combat our enemies in the public sphere.

Everyone who truly loves animals, for the joy and even the sustenance they bring to human life, needs to understand how threatened they are. **T**