

Final Turn

PRICE NO UPSET *By Suzi Shoemaker*

The quiet new buyer at this year's mixed bloodstock sales is NO BID. At the Keeneland January sale, this fate claimed 38 horses. At Ocala Breeders' Sales winter mixed auction, 26. At Fasig-Tipton sales in Texas, Maryland, and Kentucky, buyers judged 35 horses bred for the Sport of Kings to be of no value.

When six leading sale companies announced a policy last year of a \$1,000 opening bid ("upset") for breeding and paddock sales, it sounded great to most breeders and consignors. We remembered one year in the early '90s when the leading buyer by volume at Keeneland in November was a dealer in slaughter horses and nurse mares. With foal crops inching upward and the economy sputtering, none of us wanted to be there again.

But in the first two months of 2001, a lot of Thoroughbreds are suddenly worth nothing. At the 2000 Keeneland November Sale, before adopting the \$1,000 minimum, there were no horses listed as "no bid," and only 26 of the 3,256 horses sold brought less than \$1,000. Of those 26, 18 were weanlings, and the remaining eight averaged \$775.

USDA figures for "loose" horses weighing 900-1,200 pounds, sold through the Front Royal Stockyards in Richmond, Va., on Jan. 10, 2001, show a price range of \$450-\$700 for horses in good to average flesh. The Ontario Livestock Exchange, which estimates 80,000-100,000 horses received from the U.S. for slaughter last year, reports a price range of \$336-\$616 for 800-1,000 pound horses in good flesh. Even if "killer" buyers attended the November sales, it's hard to see how they could profit at these prices. One dealer told me it's not worth his time; there are too many places he can buy in volume.

Does forcing buyers to make an arbitrary opening bid improve the lot of the horses—or owners—who have paid sale companies \$600-\$1,000 each to sell their horses? Or does it mean somebody with \$900 and a good home leaves without a horse, and a dealer buys the animal at the barn? Does this policy force strapped owners to abandon horses

with the selling agent or boarding farm? And is it realistic to think a handful of under-funded equine charities can handle anything but a small fraction of the 68,678 Thoroughbreds that raced in 1999 alone?

The Racehorse Adoption Referral Program list provided by NTRA Charities names nearly 40 organizations in 24 states which offer aid to at-risk equines. Some have received grants from Thoroughbred Charities of America; most have not. A dozen random calls to these charities gives a quick appreciation for how many unwanted horses there are, and how overwhelmed people working in equine rescue are.

Without exception the people I spoke with were passionate about their mission. Most are operating on tiny budgets, many are unable to accept new cases, and some even pay to board rescued horses at other facilities.

We will register an estimated 36,700 foals in the crop of 2000. Even with Paul Mellon's \$5-million bequest to the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, how many Thoroughbreds can we feed for 20 years? Is it preferable, as one animal cruelty investigator asked me, to subject these horses to years of starvation or neglect? Isn't it better to recognize that thousands of Thoroughbreds are slaughtered every year, and work diligently for humane holding and transport for these animals?

Addressing these problems will take the cooperation of breeders, consignors, and sale companies. Breeders must retire, give away, or euthanize unwanted animals, not send them to the breeding shed or consign them to the next sale. Agents have a duty to appraise marginal animals honestly, and encourage their clients to choose alternatives to breeding or selling at public auction.

It is the duty of sale companies to sell the horses consigned to their auctions. Since prices for horse meat fluctuate, inform owners of the sum needed to protect their animals and let them decide. More importantly, develop alternative markets by advertising mixed sales in publications aimed at enthusiasts of steeplechasing, combined training, and hunting or jumping. Many of these buyers assume they can't afford to buy at such sales. Our message? "You CAN own a Thoroughbred." 



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