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Beasts of Burden: What happens to thoroughbred racehorses after retirement

By Laura Ann Mullane
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I'm galloping my thoroughbred through the Maryland hills. It's late spring, so the shadows are getting shorter, finally surrendering to the advancing light. I'm out of the saddle, standing in my stirrups, letting my horse roll beneath me. I gradually reach my arms forward to lengthen the reins, to give his head and neck more freedom, to give him the chance to find his own balance, to find that space between the tame and the wild. But I have to be careful. He wants to run. Everything in his breeding and training until a few months ago tells him to run as fast as he possibly can.

But now things are different. I come along -- this strange woman who's at least four inches taller and 40 pounds heavier than any jockey who ever sat on his back. This woman who keeps asking him to slow down. This woman who says "Easy, easy" in a voice so low and soft it sounds like a prayer. Maybe it is.

State Deputy was a thoroughbred born with promise. Foaled in Kentucky in 2001, he was a son of the great stallion Deputy Minister, who won more than half his races and whose stud fee that year was $150,000. State Deputy was sold as a 2-year-old at the esteemed Keeneland, Ky., auction for $75,000.

Three years later, I bought him for $650. By then, he was 200 pounds underweight. His ribs poked through a patchy coat that was riddled with scabs from a skin infection called rain rot. His hooves were the equivalent of tires with their tread worn bare. He had run 21 races -- never winning a single one. His career earnings totaled a paltry $11,539. In his final race, the comment on his race record stated simply, "No factor."

Just because he was slow didn't mean he was without potential. I bought State Deputy to be my partner in the sport of eventing, which requires the same horse and rider pair to compete in dressage (where the rider must guide the horse through a complex series of patterns at varied gaits using subtle leg and rein cues), cross-country jumping and stadium jumping. Thoroughbreds excel at eventing and have dominated its upper levels for years. I wanted to reach those levels, so it made sense to buy a thoroughbred. But money was an issue. A successful upper-level event horse can cost as much as $30,000, and I didn't have that kind of cash to drop on my hobby. In contrast, most off-the-track thoroughbreds sell for $2,000 to $6,000. When Rebecca Roach, my trainer and the owner of Moon Rising Farm in Boyds, called in February 2006 to say she'd found a horse that cost just $650, I asked, disbelieving, "Does he have all four legs?"

She laughed. "Apparently," she said.

"Then why is he so cheap?"

"You'll learn soon enough that off-the-track thoroughbreds are a dime a dozen," she said. "More need homes than can find them."

She was right. I would learn it -- sooner than I expected.

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Like most Americans, I knew little about horseracing. I grew up a horse-crazy kid in a decidedly non-horse-loving family. My fierce passion was sustained only by periodic visits to my uncle's ranch in Texas, where I would spend hours riding his horses bareback across the plains. I didn't start riding seriously until I was an adult and then focused on learning dressage and jumping. My exposure to racing was limited to watching the

Triple Crown races on TV each spring.

I had always assumed that most racehorses retired to a life as a stud or broodmare, or were sold at high prices as sport horses. But State Deputy's price tag made me wonder: What happens to the majority of these thoroughbreds once their racing days are over?

The Jockey Club, the national registry of thoroughbreds headquartered in Lexington, Ky., reports that approximately 35,000 thoroughbreds are foaled in North America each year, 68 percent of which are destined for a career on the racetrack. Of those horses, nearly 70 percent will win at least one race, but only 5 percent will win a bigger-pursed stakes race, and only two-tenths of a percent will win a Grade I stakes race, which awards the biggest purse and creates the biggest superstars.

For every Big Brown or Rachel Alexandra winning millions in front of sold-out crowds, there are unheralded thoroughbreds -- such as State Deputy -- that also race their hearts out each day, but for small purses on cheaper tracks to nearly empty stands. Eventually, lackluster performance or an injury ends these horses' careers. At least 3,000 such racehorses are retired each year, usually by age 6 if not younger, the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation estimates. Given that most horses live well into their 20s, the question of what to do with them for the next 15 or more years looms. I learned that, frequently, the answer is one most horse lovers would rather not think about: Approximately two out of every three thoroughbreds that come off the track -- even those that are sound and healthy -- are euthanized, abandoned on public land or in empty fields, or slaughtered -- their meat exported to Europe and Japan for human consumption.

The closure of horse slaughterhouses in the United States in 2007, after Congress barred the Department of Agriculture from using funds to conduct horse slaughter inspections, did not diminish the phenomenon much. The USDA estimates that more than 90,000 horses were exported to Canada and Mexico last year for slaughter. The Livestock Marketing Association, which advocates the resumption of horse slaughter in this country, puts the number at more than 120,000. By contrast, in 2006, horse slaughter in the United States and the export of horses for slaughter tallied about 150,000, according to the USDA.

Horse slaughter has no shortage of opponents, mainly advocacy groups such as the Humane Society of the United States, the Animal Welfare Institute and PETA. The Humane Society asserts that the conditions under which the horses are transported to the slaughterhouses don't address the unique needs of the animals, which are crammed into low-ceilinged trailers designed for cattle, sheep and pigs that don't allow horses to hold their heads at a natural height. USDA regulations permit horses to be transported for 24 hours straight without food or water. Once at the slaughterhouse, horses are exposed to the loud noise of the plant, slippery floors and the odor of blood, all of which terrify the animals and trigger their flight response, said Nicholas Dodman, a veterinary professor at Tufts University and a member of the leadership council of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association.

Supporters of slaughter counter that the process is humane. Former U.S. representative Charles W. Stenholm of Texas, a policy adviser for the Livestock Marketing Association, said U.S. regulations for transport of horses to slaughter were created with the input of veterinarians and others in the field. The captive bolt gun, for example, that is used to render the horse unconscious before its throat is slit has been deemed acceptable by the American Veterinary Medical Association, he said.

Efforts to stop horse slaughter have gained momentum in recent years as public awareness has grown. Last year in the House and Senate, bills were introduced that would prohibit trafficking in horses for human consumption of their meat. In December, the New York Racing Association announced that it would ban any trainer or breeder who sells a horse to slaughter. Other mid-Atlantic racetracks also have no-slaughter policies on the books, including Pimlico and Laurel Park in Maryland, Colonial Downs in Virginia and Charles Town and Mountaineer Park in West Virginia.

Still, some people, including my own horse's vet, argue that the practice is a necessary option. "When the slaughterhouses in the U.S. were closed, no one asked, 'Now what?'" said Carol Swandby, who has worked as a track vet for 25 years. She argues that before slaughter was outlawed, alternatives should have been in place to deal with the nation's unwanted horses. The roughly 10 thoroughbred rescue organizations that serve the mid-Atlantic region -- which use donations to care for or to find homes for the animals -- are all full, Swandby noted.

When I asked whether it would be more humane for people to euthanize their unwanted horses by injection, she said that euthanizing a healthy horse is a hard sell to many owners. "They've cared for these horses sometimes for years. ... They're part of the family," she said, explaining that the livestock auctions, where meat buyers often purchase horses at low prices and transport them to Canada or Mexico for slaughter, allow owners a little hope. "There's always the chance that a little girl will see the horse, fall in love with him and buy him."

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I started calling State Deputy "Pilot" as a nod to my father, who was an astronaut. As soon as Pilot arrived at Moon Rising Farm, my trainer, Roach, gave me a list of treatments to get him healthy again: powerful de-wormers, medicated shampoos, special shoes, visits from the equine dentist and chiropractor, long trail rides. He was turned out in a lush grass field with five other geldings where he could graze all day and run at will. It all seemed to be working.

At the same time, I started teaching him that he could use his body for something other than running: that he could bend his neck and ribcage and relax his jaw; that he could walk, trot and canter without pulling at the bit. Eventually, I asked him to jump. Every request I made he complied with. When I groomed him at the end of our rides, he would nuzzle his head into the crook of my neck and rest it there.

I began planning to enter us in competitions. But one morning in May, three months after I had bought him, something went wrong. As Pilot was eating his breakfast, he stopped suddenly and stretched his neck toward the ground, coughing hard. He stood there, motionless, with his nose just above the ground, making a sound as if he was trying to swallow.

I'd heard of this -- a condition called esophageal obstruction but commonly referred to as "choke" -- but I'd never seen it. Choke occurs when a horse eats too fast and a wad of feed gets stuck in its throat. Pilot was trying desperately to cough the feed out. He could breathe, but he couldn't swallow, and it was obvious he was in pain.

I called Swandby, who arrived within the hour. She took one look at Pilot and said, "Yep, it's choke. Get me some warm water."

I held Pilot's heavily sedated head as Swandby pumped warm water through a long tube that she had snaked down his throat. The water was supposed to break apart the obstruction. But whenever she would push the water in, most of it would pour back out through his mouth, bringing with it the sweet smell of grass and grain that I normally found so comforting but now turned my stomach. Finally, the water flushed through, taking the feed with it. As Swandby packed up her things, she leveled her eyes at me. "I cleared probably a pound of feed from his esophagus, and it took over an hour. That's not normal. My guess is this is going to happen again."

And it did ... three more times in the space of three months. The final time was late on a Saturday that September. I was gone, so Roach held Pilot for Swandby and then called to tell me that Pilot's esophageal wall had weakened so much that Swandby worried that next time the tube would perforate it, causing a

traumatic death. Roach took a deep breath. "Laura, Carol really thinks you should put him down, and I agree."

I was surprised at how ferociously my sobbing came. He was only 5 years old and, aside from this, healthy. How could I possibly make the decision to end his life?

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It's impossible to talk about horses without talking about money. For most Americans, horses -- especially racehorses -- are a symbol of wealth and prestige. The owners of Kentucky Derby thoroughbreds are pictured in their box seats on race day wearing designer clothes and jewelry, and often flanked by celebrities. But this isn't the reality for most in the racing industry. "Most owners aren't wealthy," said Kimberly Clark, who trained racehorses for 20 years and now runs a rescue operation that placed more than 120 thoroughbreds last year. "The horse has to make enough money to support itself." And the majority of racehorses earn their keep by running in claiming races.

In a claiming race, a trainer can purchase ("claim") a horse in the field for an amount determined by the track before the race. Once a claimed horse breaks from the gate, it belongs to the trainer who bought it. Claiming races can offer trainers the chance to buy a potentially talented horse at a bargain. But critics argue that too often, the races drop poorly performing horses into a never-ending cycle of purchase and sale with little regard for their welfare. It's also a risk to the owner, who might not want to lose the horse but needs to take the risk in the hope of a payday.

"Don't fall in love with a horse," Charles Hadry, assistant trainer to Jeff Runco at Charles Town racetrack, told me as we stood outside Runco's barn on the backstretch one morning last January. "You'll go broke. And if you do fall in love, make sure it's one that wins so you know they'll be around for a while."

Runco has been Charles Town's trainer of the year for four years straight, and last year alone, he won 150 races, for a total of $2.8 million in earnings. He trains about 90 horses. Two of them would run in claiming races later that night: 4-year-old chestnut fillies Beboppin Betty and Big Diamond.

At the start of her race, Beboppin Betty led right out of the gate, despite her unenviable post position of eighth out of a field of eight, and stayed in the lead for all 4 furlongs. She crossed the finish line and was whisked to the winner's circle. No one had claimed her.

Big Diamond was also in the last post position -- 10th out of 10. "It's a tough position to win from," Runco said, adding wryly, "but she looks for excuses to lose. ... This could be a career-deciding race for her." I sat next to Runco to watch the race. The sun had set a couple hours earlier, and a light snow was starting to fall. We watched as the horses broke from the gate. Big Diamond managed to stay with the pack for a while, but by the backstretch, it was clear she wasn't even in the hunt. She finished dead last. Runco shook his head and went down to meet her as she came off the track, where he would learn if she had been claimed. She hadn't been. I asked what was next for her.

"I'm not sure," he said.

Earlier in the day, Runco's wife and business partner, Susan, said that most of their horses' racing careers last three to four years if they're successful. After the animals are retired, the Runcos find homes for them through rescue groups, or sell them to become show horses or broodmares. Yet as I watched Big Diamond's groom lead her back to her stall, I knew that even if the Runcos are careful about where their horses go after they leave their farm, that doesn't always mean a happy end. I thought of a horse named Merlin I had sold a few years earlier. I had kept in touch with his new owner for a while, but then we both moved and lost contact.

Who's to say Merlin's new owner didn't fall on hard times and sell him? He was a difficult horse to ride. Someone might have bought him, felt as though he was too much to handle, and offloaded him at a livestock auction.

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Two kinds of auctions sell horses. Sport horse auctions typically draw high-rolling buyers whose bids can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. At the Keeneland, Ky., auction in April for 2-year-old thoroughbreds in training, the average sale price was $169,000. Livestock auctions, however, sell horses to buyers who purchase them for work, pleasure or slaughter. Such auctions are known as places to pick up horses inexpensively, often for less than $1,000. Because livestock auctions don't track the horses after they're sold, it's impossible to know how many end up at slaughter. But both advocates and opponents of horse slaughter agree that meat buyers frequently purchase horses at livestock auctions.

A popular auction in the mid-Atlantic is New Holland in Lancaster County, Pa., which sells horses every Monday. One cold, gray morning last February, I pulled up and parked in a lot crowded with livestock trailers, Amish buggies and pickups. I was meeting Anne Russek, a licensed trainer from Natural Bridge, Va., who has spent the last seven years rescuing off-the-track thoroughbreds she finds at auctions and believes are destined for slaughter. She began working in the racing industry 40 years ago, at age 16, becoming a trainer and breeder.

Russek led me to a barn aisle where horses were lined on both sides, tied closely next to each other with their hind ends facing a narrow walkway. On their hips were yellow tags with ID numbers. Many of the horses were unbearably thin -- their ribs clearly visible and their hip bones protruding under a layer of skin stretched taut, like knuckles in a leather glove. Some had oozing eyes; others had bleeding cuts on their legs.

Of the 136 horses there that day, Russek estimated at least 20 were thoroughbreds. She was able to positively identify six as ex-racehorses by their tattoos -- found on the underside of every thoroughbred racehorse's lip. Of those, Russek was able to contact the owners of three who then bought their horses back. One horse was Lord Calverton, a bay gelding. His former owner, Robert Leaf, had given him to a woman who had said she would retrain him to be a show horse. Less than three weeks later, he was at New Holland, where he would sell for $375. When Leaf found out, he called the woman and demanded that she buy him back. She did, and Lord Calverton now lives with a family in Virginia.

Selling horses for meat is a legitimate business but a dying one, according to the Livestock Marketing Association. Stenholm said that without competition from U.S. slaughterhouses, the Canadian and Mexican plants can buy horses for significantly less than they could three years ago. Jeff Bynum, who operates three livestock auctions in Alabama and Tennessee, said horse sales at his auctions have dropped about 70 percent since 2007. Today, his auctions sell an average of 110 horses per month at an average price of $180. He estimates that from 30 to 45 percent are sold to slaughterhouses. The current market price for horsemeat at a Canadian processing plant is 20 to 40 cents per pound. So a typical 1,000-pound thoroughbred would sell for slaughter for $200 to $400. When one considers that the meat seller must also pay to ship the horses north of the border, "it's barely enough to get by," Bynum said.

At the auction, across the aisle from Lord Calverton stood Sally Zone, tag number 38. Small and thin and missing whole patches of fur from rain rot, Sally was a 4-year-old bay filly that had last raced in November at Charles Town before it implemented its no-slaughter policy. Most thoroughbreds' care must be closely managed after they come off the track. Otherwise, they lose weight easily and become vulnerable to parasites and infections. I stood on the opposite side of a lattice screen from Sally, watching her hungrily eat from the hay trough. "Hi, girl," I said. She looked up and pricked her ears, then sniffed me through the holes in the screen. Sally didn't know the fate that awaited her. And, in truth, neither did I. But I knew the odds were

stacked against her. Russek was unable to contact her owner or trainer that day. Sally sold for $200.

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When my horse Pilot was euthanized on a beautiful late September day, I couldn't bring myself to be there, which felt like a betrayal. So Roach held him for me while Swandby administered the overdose of barbiturates with the single prick of a needle. I had said goodbye the day before, when I took him for a final trail ride. As soon as we got to the edge of the field where I usually galloped him, he began to prance -- ready to run. I gathered up the reins and pressed my calves against his sides, sending him forward one last time. He was a thoroughbred, after all.

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I like to believe that my love of horsesseparates me from the person who brought Sally to auction that winter day. But sometimes I wonder if we're not that different. In some ways, every decision I've made about horses has been tied to money. What first brought me to buy an off-the-track thoroughbred was not so much the desire to rescue a horse as my limited finances.

The fact is, horses are expensive. At a minimum, feeding and basic care costs $150 per month, and that's assuming the owner has land. Boarding a horse in the Washington area can run from $300 to $800 per month or more. Add to this shoeing costs ($50 to $200 every six weeks), vet bills (routine care is about $200 annually, but emergency care can reach the thousands), and tack (saddle, bridle, etc. -- which can cost more than $1,000). Training and lessons add even more, as does competing in shows. In the seven months I had owned Pilot, I spent $8,000 on him. Even in good economic times, it's a difficult hobby to sustain for the average horse owner. During a recession, it can be impossible.

Melanie Kemery, 21, of Blackwood, N.J., owns five horses, paying more than $1,000 a month to board four of them. When she was working as a waitress and as a full-time veterinary technician, she could afford to keep them and compete at horse shows regularly. But the restaurant where she worked closed and the vet clinic cut her hours by more than half. She's now looking for homes for three of her horses, including a 12-year-old thoroughbred she rescued three years ago.

"When I got her, she was skin and bones," Kemery said. "She was afraid of everything. ... She trusts me now. The idea of loading her onto a trailer, giving her a pat, and that'll be the end of it ... keeps me up some nights."

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The day after Pilot was put down, Roach called me. "I don't know if it's too soon to tell you this," she said, "but I picked up a horse this weekend, and he's yours if you want him." He was another off-the-track thoroughbred, a 4-year-old named Been Patient. He had run his last race just six weeks before. His owner retired him after he suffered a stress fracture to his cannon bone.

"This one is free," Roach told me.

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I'm galloping my thoroughbred through the hills. We're at a horse show in Virginia, on the backside of a cross-country course, far from the other horses and trucks and loudspeakers. Now, it's just the two of us. A large log lies across the field in front of us -- our next jump. I sit in the saddle, squeeze my legs and shorten the reins to balance him and tell him that a jump is coming. But he already knows. His ears prick forward, and he rocks his weight back onto his hind legs, pushing off the ground. For a moment, we are flying. Then

we turn and run headlong toward the finish line, toward home.

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