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by bill finley

DRUGS = FEWER STARTS = LESS MONEY FOR THE OWNER

The North American racehorse competes on a plethora of medications for the most basic and obvious reason: their owners believe they will compete better with the use of drugs and therefore earn more money. As long as that mind-set exists, legal drugs like Lasix aren't going anywhere. The pro-medication forces are committed and influential, stand firmly in the way of any meaningful change and have become even more energized by victories such as the Breeders' Cup's about-face on banning Lasix.

Since it causes a significant degree of weight loss in a horse after it is administered, Lasix is an effective performance-enhancing drug and it does seem to help with bleeding issues. Normosol, Flunixin, Banamine and bute were among the drugs legally given to the starters in this year's GI Belmont S. the day before the race and they may be short-term solutions to whatever is ailing a horse.

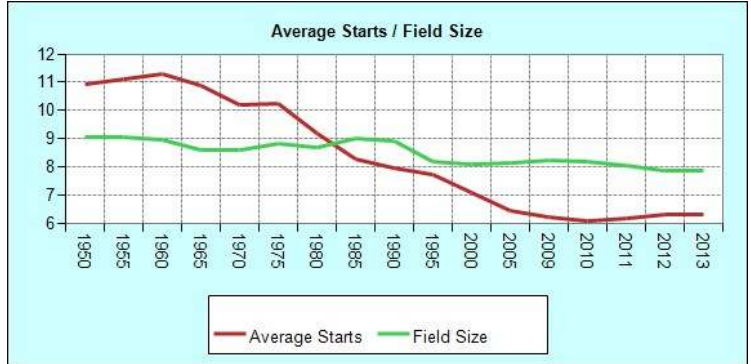
There are positives to giving a horse Lasix and other medications. But what of the negatives? There is overwhelming evidence that these drugs have led horses to race less frequently and make fewer career starts. The less a horse races, the less opportunity there is for an owner to make money. With that mind, owners need to start asking themselves if the very same drugs they have been led to believe have helped put more in their pockets have actually done the opposite. The numbers say that's exactly what has happened.

In 1975 the number for average starts per horse per year was 10.23, only slightly different from the figure for 1950, 10.91. It's right about at that time that Lasix become part of the sport's lexicon. Writing for the *Blood-Horse*, Steve Haskin reports that Lasix was legal in 14 states by early 1975. Over the next 20 years Lasix spread from state to state, province to province. When New York, the last hold out, legalized the drug for use on race-day in 1995 every racing jurisdiction in the U.S. and Canada allowed Lasix.

It can't be a coincidence that 1975 is right about the time that horses started racing less and less often. In just five years, from 1975 to 1980, the number of average starts per horse went down to 9.21, a 9.9% decline.

As more and more states added Lasix and more and more horses, horses with and without bleeding problems, began racing on the drug the number of starts per horse fell right in line.

By 1995 it was at 7.73. In 2000, it was 7.10. It hit its nadir in 2008 at 6.20. From 1975 to 2008, the number of starts the average horse was making per year declined by 39.4%.



The red line represents average starts per horse by year.

Source: *The Jockey Club Fact Book*

That the number has held relatively steady ever since (it was 6.32 in 2013) is further evidence that Lasix and, perhaps, other legal drugs, is at the root of the problem. Once virtually every horse in the country started running on Lasix there was no reason for the numbers to decline even further.

If horses were somehow starting less often on a year-to-year basis but having longer careers then the story would be different. But, predictably, horses no longer last as long as they used to. For horses born in 1976, the number of average starts over their career was 28.55. Fast forward to 2004, a year from which the vast majority of horses are now retired, and the number has shrunk to 17.46. Horses born in 2004 raced 38.8% less often than ones born in 1976. That the number is almost identical to the decline in average starts per year is obviously no coincidence.

The decline in number of starts per year per horse appears to be as North American phenomenon only. From 1995, when New York approved Lasix and the drug was then legal everywhere, to 2013 the average number of starts per horse in a year has fallen 18.2%.

In other countries horses may not make as many total starts per year as U.S. horses for a number of reasons, including a lack of year-round racing opportunities in Europe, but they are racing as much, if not more often, than ever. The *TDN* surveyed three prominent drug-free racing countries from which statistics from 1995 to 2012 were available through the International Federation of Horseracing Authorities. During that time period, the average number of starts per horse (for flat races only) has increased by 17.6% in Great Britain, by 10.9% in France and by 12.6% in Hong Kong.

Some want to blame these alarming trends in North America on an overall weakening of the breed, arguing that the Thoroughbred has changed dramatically in a very short period of time and is no longer sturdy enough to sustain the rigors of a substantial racing campaign. But ask virtually any scientist specializing in equine genetics and they'll tell you that's nonsense, that it might take 1,000 years for the species to change that dramatically.

In the November 2010 [story](#) I wrote for the *TDN* entitled “Do We Need a Sturdier Racehorse,” here’s what Dr. James MacLeod of the Gluck Equine Research Center had to say about the theory that horses are suddenly so much weaker than they used to be:

“It is hard to arrive at a genetic explanation for a shift in the population as large and as diverse as Thoroughbreds in such a short period of time,” Dr. MacLeod said. “I understand there

are many variables in play in terms of how condition books are written, how we train and other factors, and separating those things out would be a challenge. But, purely on the genetics and looking at what

is this animal and the biomechanics of its tissues, it is difficult to support an inherited biological mechanism to explain why horses race much less frequently today than three to five decades ago.”

The numbers say that the real culprit is medication. Common sense points to the real culprit being medication. To dehydrate a horse and pump it full of a number of other drugs before it goes out and gives a maximum effort in competition has to have adverse, long-term effects. Some owners may not care, figuring they would be hard-pressed to win any races without the performance-enhancing benefits of Lasix. But how big of an edge is the drug? Horses in this era of Lasix and therapeutic medications run no faster than horses out of the hay, oats and water era.

If drugs are in fact causing horses to have fewer starts and fewer opportunities to make money, is giving them to the animal in an owner’s best interest? That’s the real question and the industry, especially the owners, needs to come up with some answers. On average, the horses you own today are far less productive than their predecessors; they make 40% fewer starts than they would have 30 years ago.

That hurts the owner and hurts them where it really matters, on the bottom line. Yet the majority of owners, parroting the party line of their trainers, seem to be in favor of maintaining the status quo. They need to consider the possibility that they’ve been shooting themselves in the foot all these many years.

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