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Congrats, American Pharoah! Now End Horse Racing

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By [Kavitha A. Davidson](#)

Now that American Pharoah has captured the first Triple Crown in decades, many are wondering what that means for the future of horse racing, and of the colt himself. The New York Times's Joe Drape believes the feat will [give horse racing](#) "a badly needed shot in the arm," with no indication of whether the hypodermic metaphor is [meant to be ironic](#). American Pharoah's trainer, Bob Baffert, said he wants the horse to race as long as possible, though he did give a nod to the idea of letting the three-year-old quit while he's ahead.

Here's my wish: That American Pharoah goes out on a high note, and with him, the entire sport of horse racing.

Frankly, it's a wonder that horse racing has lasted this long. Idealists would point to the sport's [long history](#) in this country and to the unique place horses occupy in the American consciousness. But save for a few big races each year that are ultimately more cultural events and excuses to drink than marquee athletic showcases, the sport has been on a [steady decline](#). And despite its blue-blood

reputation, the "sport of kings" is really just the sport of vice, kept afloat by a system of gambling and doping that amounts to institutionalized animal abuse.

The main controversy today is over an anti-bleeding drug known as Lasix. In the U.S., it's often administered on the day of the race, along with up to 26 other permitted substances; race-day medications are banned in almost every other country. Several top trainers have banded together to push for a plan to [ban race-day medications](#) in the U.S., citing the negative effects on the health of the animal and the reputation of the sport. Those resistant to change, including the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, claim that injecting drugs is actually good for a horse's health.

This argument about what's "best" for the horses blatantly overlooks the sport's role in endangering their health in the first place. Lasix is used to treat bleeding in the lungs, a condition called [exercise induced pulmonary hemorrhage](#). EIPH is for the most part found only in racing animals, camels and greyhounds as well as horses. There are two theories of what causes EIPH in horses -- that is, the mechanism by which hemorrhaging occurs -- but as the disease's name would suggest, it's undoubtedly related to abnormally strenuous physical activity. You can debate the benefits of Lasix all you want, but it's clear the best thing for a horse's health would be to keep him off the track.

Horse racing is inherently cruel, and the problems start, literally, from birth: As the Indianapolis Star's [Gregg Doyel notes](#), we should expect nothing less than physical breakdown from an animal bred to sustain an abnormally muscular carriage on skinnier-than-usually legs. What you don't see behind the veil of seersucker and mint juleps are the thousands of horses that collapse under the weight of their science-project bodies. This weekend at Belmont, all eyes on American Pharoah meant nobody was paying attention to Helwan, the four-year-old French colt who had to be euthanized on the track after breaking his left-front cannon bone. It was Helwan's first time

racing on Lasix.

Helwan's breakdown is by no means an outlier. In 2008, a national audience watched in horror as Eight Belles collapsed immediately after crossing the finish line at the Kentucky Derby with two broken ankles and had to be immediately euthanized. In 2006, then-undefeated Barbaro suffered a similar injury at the Preakness and was eventually put down as well.

In 2012, the New York Times conducted a thorough investigation of the [dangers of racing](#) and the unchecked doping that furthers the risks, revealing that, "24 horses die each week at racetracks across America." From 2009 to 2012, 6,600 horses suffered injuries or breakdowns. In that same period, 3,600 horses died at state-regulated tracks.

It's easy for the public to overlook these facts. Most Americans only care about horse racing during the month-long Triple Crown season. And just as in sports played by humans, the high-profile stars get all the attention while the plight of the little guy goes ignored. The horses at the most risk are cheaper animals competing in lower-tier races, known as claiming races. According to the Times, horses in claiming races suffer injuries or breakdowns at a 22-percent higher rate than upper-tier horses, partially because drug regulation is much more lax than on the Triple Crown circuit.

It's true that abuses and safety concerns exist to varying degrees across all sports. But the more we have learned about health risks in football and hockey, and of performance-enhancing drug use in baseball and cycling, the more we stepped up our efforts to rectify the problems. As football players learn of the game's long-term health dangers, many rethink their participation. But this exposes racing's fundamental ill: A horse can't consent.

"He's the one that won -- it wasn't me," Baffert said after American Pharoah's win at Belmont, reminding us who the athlete really is in racing: "It was the horse." It's time to rethink a sport in which the athlete has no say in the terms of his participation.

To contact the author on this story:

Kavitha A Davidson at kdavidson19@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor on this story:

Toby Harshaw at tharshaw@bloomberg.net