

Whipping up a storm – simply by perception?

BY GEIR STABELL

A few years ago, the principal TV station in Norway did an interesting series, where they compared school kids in New York City with kids in Oslo. By interviewing children, they came up with some truly stark differences. Not least when looking at life experiences. In a class of 25 pupils in New York, only one had seen a sheep in the flesh. In a similar class in Norway, all the kids had seen a sheep. On the other hand, none of the Norwegians had been witness to a killing, or seen a person die. In New York, three of the 25 kids had actually done so.

How human beings relate to the world, to other human beings, and not least to animals and nature, is dependant on how close they have been allowed to come to these factors around them. Naturally, the whole world offers all of us more than enough opportunities to experience fellow human beings. Though in many of the big cities, it is perfectly possible to grow up without ever seeing a farm animal. Never mind a wild one.

Truth be told, the average American, at least those living rural lives, know precious little about animals. Therefore, it came as no surprise when there was an absolute uproar in the wake of the tragic death of Eight Belles, who broke both her front ankles shortly after finishing second in the Kentucky Derby. Protests came flooding to the media, many of them suggesting that jockey Gabriel Saez, a young and rising star in the weighing room, had whipped the filly too much in the finish and thus was to blame for her fatal injuries. 24 hours earlier, Saez had ridden a perfect race to win the Kentucky Oaks on Proud Spell. His name was suddenly well known. Though not so well known that those going for a Saturday stroll in Central Park the following morning had any clue who this Gabriel was. After the Derby, nearly every literate man and woman in New York, some with kids

who believe milk comes from a factory right next to the local Coca Cola producers, had heard the name Saez. “He who whips horses until they break a leg, sometimes two...”

“Horseracing should be banned”, many said. A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing. Total ignorance can start wars. A war of words attacked the sport. No more than two years after the sad end to Barbaro’s career, horseracing was once more in a dim light. If a horse breaks down and needs destroying, on a high profile day like Derby day at Churchill Downs, it is very unfortunate. When it is a horse finishing in the top three in the Run for The Roses, it gets fully exposed. When that horse happens to be a filly, ‘taking on the boys’, it becomes dead meat for tabloid editors. If Eight Belles had won the Derby, and lived, she would have been given plenty of column space and air-time. I do have my doubts, however, that she would have been given as much coverage as was the case following her death. In all probability, her fatal injuries had absolutely nothing to do with the Churchill track, and even less to do with how Saez used his whip. On Kentucky Derby day, Churchill Downs had 96 horses racing on the dirt track, all ridden by jockeys carrying a whip. Eight Belles was the only one to break down. If the track was so punishing, and the whipping so cruel, that horses can break legs as a result of it, the remaining 95 must have been extremely solid animals, right?

On the same day as the Kentucky Derby, the 2,000 Guineas at Newmarket produced a thrilling finish, where Henrythenavigator, ridden by Johnny Murtagh, beat the Kevin Manning ridden New Approach by a nose. Both riders were subsequently found to have broken the rules, as they had been using the whip too frequently. Riders breaking the rules on two horses collecting a total of nearly £300,000 were not disqualified – nor did they suffer from any bad publicity. Where it was mentioned, it was merely in passing, probably because journalists have become so used to riders offending the rules in their quest for Group One success.

Whereas these two experienced jockeys probably both knew that they would be punished for their use of the whip, it is a fair bet that young Baez, having his first ride in the Kentucky Derby, had no way of knowing that his filly was about to break two ankles. After all, she finished the race well, and beat all but the outstanding Big Brown. Baez went through a terrible time after his Derby ride, while for Murtagh and Manning the next week was like any other week. Morally, perhaps their horses should have been disqualified, or perhaps the authorities should take a seriously close look at these regulations and make some changes. Fines mean little, when horses win classics. How about a 'red card system' along the lines of football. What if riders using the whip incorrectly in a Group race were banned from riding in Group races for the next four weeks? Oh, I hear many say, what about the trainers who have already booked him, maybe declared to run, in a big race coming up. Well, maybe we could just say 'tough luck' and leave them to discuss the problem between themselves. In private.

When a horse suffers as bad an injury as Eight Belles, or Barbaro, it is most likely as a cause of a weakness that has been developing during its career. This is not so easy to explain, as it is to point at the use of the whip and say 'look, the rider is hurting the horse'. Is the rider hurting the horse? Of course he is. Does it make the horse run faster? Nobody seems too sure, but to the average American, who is made to believe that a filly running against colts is an absolute mismatch, it seems obvious that the whipping of this filly is what made her run fast enough to finish second. That is his or her perception. Now, as we all know 'perception is everything' in this world, and to far too many, in far too many places, horseracing is perceived to be a cruel business. Perhaps it is but if it is not, and banning the whip can alter that view, well, then doing so would have an enormously positive effect on horseracing.

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