

One Welfare – One equine practitioner's perspective

When I was seven, I wanted to be a veterinarian because I loved horses. I still love horses. I became a veterinarian (in my 30s) for several other reasons. I like to use science and logic to solve problems. I wanted to return to my home town which isn't rich in professional jobs if you aren't self-employed. I realized that when your day-to-day job doesn't provide direct contact with animals...something is missing.

I don't ever regret leaving my fortune 500 job and going to veterinary school as my first midlife crisis. Every day, I get to spend time with horses. Many of these horses were bred and born for the life they lead. These are race horses, cutting horses, halter horses, dressage horses, trail horses, and many others. Some horses are like me and have a significant change in career. They may start as a race horse and then become an eventer, a jumper, a trail horse. The owners of these types of horses expect certain levels of performance and competence from their horses. There are other horses that were not necessarily created for a specific purpose, but they have landed in a perfect spot and have owners who willingly meet their needs without expecting anything in return. Both of these, the career horse and the pasture ornament, are a joy to see every day.

Eventually, these career horses can no longer perform at the level their owners expect. Some of these are family favorites who have earned a home for life. Some of them find a new owner with lower expectations. Some of them have issues that reduce their quality of life to the point that owners elect humane euthanasia. Some of them are given away.

I see a lot of people who have rescued horses. Many of these people are amazed that someone was willing to give them a horse. Don't confuse these people with the professional horse rescues that have a network of resources that provide care for unwanted horses. These "amazed rescuers" are people who have always thought horses were pretty and many of them don't have a clue about how to interact with horses. Many of these well-meaning people have no idea what is involved in caring for a horse. I'm called in after they have had the horse for a couple of months. Their small pasture has been overgrazed and the horse is losing weight. They take a fairly well-behaved horse and give him treats for misbehaving. Much like dogs and children, rewarding bad behavior leads to worse behavior. However, this is a 1000-pound animal that can become very dangerous. When they took the horse, they didn't think about having to buy enough hay to get through the winter. They definitely didn't think about having to buy hay for late summer and fall. They didn't know that as horses age, they are often less efficient at chewing forage and require very expensive complete feeds. These were all unknowns until they are in possession of a thin horse with winter fast approaching and no hay in the barn. Some of these people have the financial means to meet the challenge, others do not.

The economic downturn we experienced in 2008 has made it more difficult for many people to pay for extra expenses. Families that used to have four horses can now only afford two...or none. In 2005, the American Association of Equine Practitioners estimated it costs \$1825 per year to care for a horse, excluding veterinary and farrier care...that's \$5 per day. Horses with health or dental issues may need

medications or special feeds that could exceed that daily cost. These numbers are significant to the budget of most families.

So far, we've been talking about horses that are following career paths. There are also horses who never meet their career goals. Maybe they aren't talented enough or maybe they don't have a good enough attitude. There is a significant population of unwanted horses. Right or wrong, a practice that is more common than we would like to admit involves selling these horses without disclosing their faults. Some of these horses are even unruly or dangerous. They may be healthy and fit, but they are not safe. If these horses find the perfect owner who can re-school them into safe companions, life is good. Most don't find that perfect connection. Sadly, there aren't enough capable people to make those connections. Euthanasia is another option for these animals. A 2009 Unwanted Horse Coalition survey found the average cost of euthanasia and disposal is \$385.

Resources are limited. Abilities are limited. Circumstances change. Some horses are unwanted.

Horse slaughter is an option that has not been available in the United States since 2007. In a world of causes and choices, it is a choice that many would not choose. Since 2007, one to two percent of the US horse population continues to be slaughtered annually. Most of these horses are shipped to plants in Canada or Mexico. While modern slaughter facilities follow humane practices and there are laws governing transport of horses, long-distance transport is stressful. There is a global market for horse meat and there are horses with limited viable options. In a world with a growing population of eaters and a shrinking population of food-providers, not allowing the use of a high-quality source of protein seems wasteful and not in the best interest of global welfare. If more than one percent of our horses end up at slaughter, shouldn't it be humanely accessible for the horse and owner?

The horse I grew up with is buried on the farm I grew up on. Luckily, my parents still lived there when Tri died and we took her back on the hill for burial. I've owned many other horses throughout my life, and hopefully many more. There isn't enough room on the hill for them all to be buried there. I enjoyed many of them, and tolerated a few. Some of them moved on to owners who appreciated them much more than me, and others were probably passed around from owner to owner most of their lives. There are lots of different kinds of horses and lots of different kinds of owners. I think we should all be able to make the choices that are right for our circumstances.

If that unwanted horse was sold to slaughter when it was young and healthy and fit, it wouldn't have gotten passed from owner to owner; it wouldn't have hurt the little girl at the third family; it wouldn't have taken the fourth family's vacation fund to buy its hay; it wouldn't have been seen by the vet last week because the eighth family wants to know why it won't gain weight eating a round bale of hay with seven other horses. He wouldn't be twenty-two years old with missing teeth, facing winter with a body condition score of 3/9, pinning his ears back at any person or horse who dares to approach. It is late in the game for this miserable horse. Humane euthanasia may be his only option.

The unwanted horse is a welfare issue for both the horses and the owners responsible for their care. The capacity of our nation's rescue organizations is pushed to the limit. Euthanasia and disposal are a viable option for some. Re-homing for a second or third career is sometimes possible. Encouraging

responsible breeding can eliminate some of the unwanted horses. Slaughter is an option to salvage some benefit from an otherwise unwanted horse. The American Veterinary Medicine Association has compiled a nice summary of horse welfare issues and the organizations involved. Search for “unwanted horse FAQ” at www.avma.org to get additional information. The welfare of horses and horse owners depends upon viable options for the unwanted horse. Welfare for each of us depends upon welfare for all of us, and vice versa.