

Daily Racing Form

Columnists | Posted 7/24/2008, 6:12 pm

No place for butchers' little helpers

By JAY HOVDEY

DEL MAR, Calif. - Richard Fields is just your average guy from the Bronx who wears a cowboy hat through the rainy streets of Manhattan, owns a casino and a racetrack, and spends as much time as possible with the horses on his ranch in Wyoming.

He is also the first racetrack owner to go out of his way to endorse a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to horse slaughter commerce in his own backyard, while at the same time putting teeth in a house rule that would ban any trainer caught sending a used-up racehorse to the butchers.

Granted, the Fields racing empire is made up entirely of Suffolk Downs, the struggling Boston track in which he purchased a controlling interest in April of 2007. Now in his second season as majority owner, Fields has had a positive response from local racing fans, especially for reviving the moribund Massachusetts Handicap with a \$500,000 purse and repositioning it as a prep for the Breeders' Cup Classic.

It was Fields's announcement on the slaughter issue, though, that caught the media's eye last month, especially in an atmosphere of heightened sensitivities toward racehorse welfare triggered by the death of Eight Belles in the Kentucky Derby and the graphic HBO RealSports report about a Thoroughbred going directly from the Mountaineer Racetrack backstretch to a Canadian slaughterhouse.

"Just because their career is done, doesn't mean you're gonna barbecue them," Fields said last week. "When was the last time we barbecued somebody out of the NFL?"

"Historically, I have a philosophy of not wanting to give up on these animals. I've always loved horses. I can't explain it, but I grew up wanting to be a cowboy. Recently we've taken three racehorses from the track to the ranch, so we've been able to watch that transition. One went on a trail ride up the mountain to about 9,000 feet. Another is in training as a hunter-jumper. They're happy.

"What I really wanted to do was send a signal to the industry," Fields added. "The fellows running the backstretch know the shippers who present a problem, and they're banned from the track. All I did was to say, listen, guys, if you think there's a new ownership who doesn't care about this, you're wrong. There was already a policy of zero tolerance. I just took it to another level."

You would think opposing the sale of horses directly from a racetrack to slaughter would be about as controversial as coming down on the side of Mom and apple pie. It should be a relatively easy position for a racetrack management to take, but any penalties would require diligent investigation to enforce. Livestock auctions that feed foreign slaughter industries continue to flourish, even in states like California where the slaughter trade is illegal. Enterprising buyers troll the stables at every racetrack, offering trainers and their owners an easy

way to dispose of outclassed, broken-down claimers while providing enough of a cover story to offer deniability all around.

Even a good-faith donation of a retired racehorse can backfire. Just ask Ron Charles, president of Santa Anita Park and chief operating officer of Magna Entertainment Corp.

In the fall of 2006, Charles learned that his former graded stakes winner Champion Lodge had been pulled out of a feedlot in Colorado while on his way to likely slaughter in a facility still legally operating in Illinois. The last Charles had heard of his horse, he'd been donated to a high school agriculture program when he could no longer stand training.

"If he'd been healthier, he would have ended up slaughtered," Charles noted. "He was too lame to load, otherwise he would have been on that truck. Just an awful thought."

Champion Lodge was rescued and nursed back to health by a local ranch owner Margaret DeSarno, a pre-vet student who somehow scraped together the \$500 asked by the slaughter shippers. Charles offered to bring the horse back to California, but DeSarno exercised her right of ownership and has been rewarded with a much healthier and very grateful Champion Lodge.

"She sent me a picture of him not long ago," Charles said. "He's a very lucky horse, and he looks great."

Luck, though, should have nothing to do with it, and Charles knows it. He also knows that the many private, nonprofit rescue and retirement organizations can handle only a small part of the retirement population, and that racetracks, with their financial and political clout, should lead the way in finding a solution.

"For years and years we have been troubled by this," Charles said. "And at first, it seems overwhelming. But the more we talked about it, the more you understand that it's the right thing to do. It's a matter of working out how to do a better job on a larger, more organized scale."

For his part, Fields is already searching for his own institutional solution to the retirement issue.

"When you get involved in horse racing, and you realize there might be a tendency to send horses off to slaughter, you've got to do something," he said. "We've looked at purchasing or leasing a large farm, to do it on a New England basis. My position is, you've got to find them a home. That may be easier said than done. But you've got to try."