

## Refuge RR's Rose Blickstead: Stop filling our slaughterhouses with Standardbreds



Rose Blickstead with rescued standbred: They deserve a better life than this.  
(Gazette, Kathy Knight)

My last column painted a gloomy picture for the Standardbred racing industry since Attractions Hippiques, the owners of the four race tracks in Quebec, filed for bankruptcy protection in June 2008, followed by Magna Entertainment's filing March 5.

Although Attractions Hippiques and the Standardbred owners have been in court trying to reach an new contract with the Quebec government, the closure of the racing industry in Quebec has already effected about 7,000 people. For a bloodline adapted to harness racing, it means death. Some have been lucky enough to be put up for adoption, but horse rescue facilities in Quebec and Ontario are full. Most will end up in slaughterhouses.

According to Rose Blickstead at the Refuge RR in Ontario sending Standardbreds to slaughter is nothing new. "We get more calls for Standardbreds (than any other breed). You see them at Lachute all the time. It's been happening all along. It's business as usual." Only now it's worse. It may be difficult to place Standardbreds in forever homes because many potential horse owners are prejudiced against them.

"The Standardbreds here are the most intelligent and most affectionate," says Blickstead. For her, Standardbreds are the hardest horses to place. "Nobody wants them. Anyone who goes to the auction, will not buy a Standardbred. They'll buy the others."

These are highly bred, intelligent horses, with calm, kind dispositions. "Those that have been placed "are truly amazing," she adds. They can be retrained to pull carriages, for eventing, dressage, trail riding, or pleasure.

Blickstead would like to see the racing industry should be shut down. She sees the problem starting with backyard breeders. "It's easy to get into the business, relatively cheap to go into the races. And hopefully, they'll win. They think they'll make big money." But most have no idea how to care for and train the horses,

or how much it costs for board, feed, shoes and veterinary services.

The big breeders may treat their horses better, but Blickstead doesn't believe that breeders can know if all their horses go to good homes, especially those sold at auction. Some breeders tell their clients that when they don't want the horse any more, they will buy it back. "They end up here after they've been passed around for several years," said Blickstead. "Breeders just can't keep track of all the horses they've produced. On average horses get passed around 12 times in their lifespan."

"And then there's the drugs. I get a lot of people mad at me in the Standardbred industry. They say, 'I love my horse. I love racing.' But if you're racing against another horse that is all doped up, there's no way, if they're one of the lower racers or breeders, that they can compete unless they do it too. They even give them cocaine. Do they test them for coke? No."

Training starts early for Standardbred horses, around one and a half years old. They're racing as two-year-olds. They don't start losing their baby teeth until age three and their bones are not fully developed. It's not unusual for these young horses to have fractured bones. Most of the high-purse stakes races are for two and three-year-olds. Although some horses stay sound and can race until they are ten, most are finished before they are four. With conceivably 26 more years to live, most owners who got into racing to make a quick buck, will not pay the \$10 a day board to keep a horse in retirement. How far does "I love my horse" go? All the way to the slaughterhouse. "Standardbreds have always been the number one horse at the slaughterhouse," adds Blickstead.

"The Standardbreds that I'm picking up tomorrow, I have to pay for. It's not that they will even drop them off here. I have to pay to go get them. We pay all the transport, we pay all the vets. We had a trainer phone us from the track. The horse had broken its leg and the owner said to put her on the truck and send her to slaughter. The trainer said, 'I don't want to do that. I feel bad for her.' We took her right from the track to St. Hy. Now she's at a foster home," said Blickstead.

"We've got one here that didn't want to race so the guy tied it to the back of the truck and dragged it. It still wouldn't go so he got a shovel and started hitting it," said Blickstead. Fortunately someone saw him before he killed the horse, offered him meat price and the horse came to live at the refuge.

"Horses have been working since the beginning of time for humans. Horses created our civilization. They've gone through war for us. They've done everything for us. They pacify our children. And in return we need to show some responsibility. They are living beings," said Blickstead. She believes that it is morally wrong for people to try to make money by exploiting other beings.

"The human race has to have a look at what's going on around us. We're overdoing everything. Whether it's animals, whether it's cars, puppy mills, or exploiting children half way around the world. Whatever it is, we need to take a second look at it. Our society has to change it. We need to take responsibility.

"When people think about horses they think Hollywood, they think race horses, Black Beauty. But it's not. This is an animal that lives between 30 and 40 years and they're abused over and over again and in the end they're still slaughtered and treated like garbage. It should not be acceptable. No matter what. It's totally wrong. We have to say we're not going to let it happen.

"If we're not going to stop the industry, we've got to make it better, Blickstead adds. "If you want to breed horses, you have to plan for their retirement. If you can't, then don't breed. How can you make more horses when there's that many at the slaughterhouse?"