



The Thoroughbred Makeover at the Kentucky Horse Park

## Second Acts

# Reasons for Optimism

IMPROVEMENTS IN AFTERCARE HELP  
ADD EVEN MORE OPPORTUNITIES

By **KIRSTEN GREEN**

**W**HEN ONE CONSIDERS that the first organized horse races were conducted in this country in the colonial era, as early as 1665 and The Jockey Club took over the *American Stud Book* in 1894; it's fair to say racing's aftercare segment is in its infancy.

Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF), one of the nation's longest-operating aftercare organizations (possibly the first) was established in 1983, a good 20-25 years before the term "aftercare" would even enter our lexicon. If we use 1983

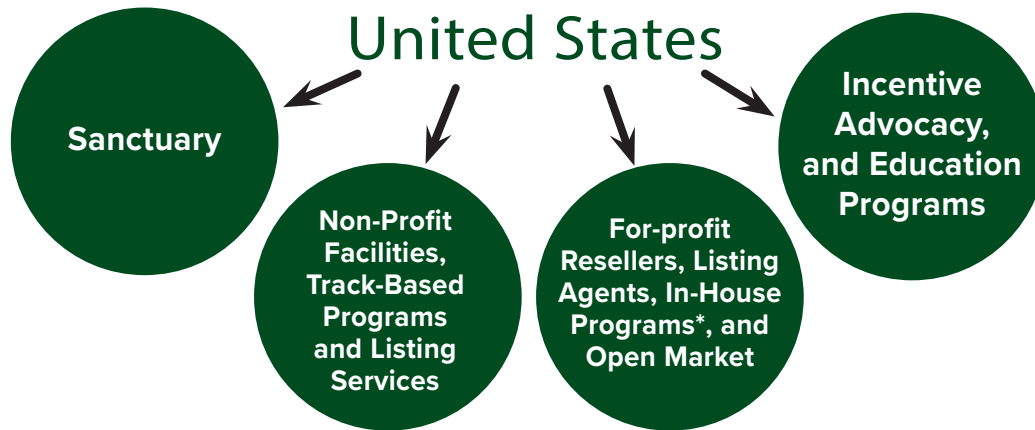
as an approximate benchmark, aftercare has only been around about 10% of the time that we've been racing in the United States.

All businesses and industries, both for-profit and non-profit, must make time to reflect on the past and think objectively about the future in order to remain effective at what they do day-in and day-out. Let's take a look at where we are, four decades in.

### Progress as an Industry

While the aftercare segment of the racing industry might be relatively young—it's made an impact in the past 40 years. Starting with adoption facilities and listing agencies, progressing to programs instituted by racing entities, the advent of accredi-

# Aftercare in the United States



\*Refers to racing connections who have established their own aftercare procedures

tation, and the innovation of education and incentive-based programs; and, with increasing demand, a thriving for-profit market; aftercare has molded itself into a robust and comprehensive ecosystem that's become very effective in transitioning horses into post-racing homes.

TRF executive director Pat Stickney notes that about 10-15 years ago when programs doing the retraining and placement of horses immediately post-track became well-established, the program was able to focus more exclusively on sanctuary and serving at-risk horses.

"It's easier to work efficiently on behalf of the horses because organizations have become more collaborative and focused on a continuum of services and care, rather than attempting to do it all," Stickney said.

Racing has improved how it engages with aftercare in concept and as an industry. Major corporations and small operations alike commit considerable resources into third-party programs both as direct funding and by way of Thoroughbred Charities of America (TCA) and Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance (TAA), and in many cases, establish their own in-house policies and programs.

"As aftercare has evolved over the years to become more commonly accepted as an integral part of our industry, I think collaborative efforts and op-

portunities have increased," said TCA executive director, Erin Halliwell.

Bev Strauss, executive director of MidAtlantic Horse Rescue (MAHR) says, "We are welcomed at the tracks in the Mid-Atlantic region, and horsemen really seem to appreciate the support we give them." Strauss credits the meaningful funding from TCA, the ASPCA Rescuing Racers initiative, and ultimately racing's creation of TAA as turning points in legitimizing aftercare. Both MAHR and TRF are programs that work with permanently retired and at-risk horses and agree that the population of rescue cases in their herds has reduced significantly, to roughly 5%-10%, meaning the majority of horses in their programs have been responsibly retired. They also agree that the overall condition of horses entering their programs, even those that could require significant rehab, has improved.

The advent of programs focused on education, advocacy, and incentives in the past 10 years has been credited as another turning point, addressing the need to drive demand.

"As the title sponsor of RRP's Thoroughbred Makeover for the last decade and a funder of both (The Jockey Club Thoroughbred Incentive Program) and TAKE2 (Second Career Thoroughbred Program), TCA has been able to support a very important aspect of aftercare," Halliwell said. "By supporting

the programs that are working to create incentives for owning an off-the-track Thoroughbred, we can help aftercare organizations by boosting the market demand for Thoroughbreds among horse owners."

These programs have become an integral part of the landscape as the demand they help to create reduces the length of time horses spend in aftercare programs, thus increasing capacity to serve more horses annually.

The volume of horses aftercare has impacted over the years should be celebrated, but the reality remains that the number of horses exiting the racing industry annually still far exceeds the capacity of traditional aftercare programs. There is still much work to be done.

## WORDS MATTER

Aftercare continues to fight negative connotations of horses being charity cases because of on-track failures. The idealistic view is that horses and industries are no longer partitioned, and a horse's life is considered as a more linear progression rather than "racing, then whatever else." (It's possible that even terms such as "off-track Thoroughbred", "aftercare," "makeover," and "rescue," "retrain," "rehab," "rehome," and "retire" contribute to this partitioned mind-set.)

The industry is primed to move in a direction where a Thoroughbred is a



Thoroughbred—regardless of its current occupation—and aftercare can be embraced as another entity that makes a vital contribution to the horse’s life cycle just like any of the dozens of other businesses and workers connected to each horse. Aftercare should not be an indication of failure but of success—the success of an industry to embrace the full life of a horse.

## ON THE HORIZON

Continued, reliable funding will remain critical in allowing aftercare to scale its infrastructure to meet demands for its services, but it’s also important to understand the essential role of the market when it comes to securing futures for our horses: customers outside of the sport who want retired racehorses. Aftercare can be a liaison to that customer, as well as a conduit to bring new fans to racing.

With the statistical likelihood of a racehorse not becoming a million-dollar earner, holistic decisions should be made, recognizing that there’s an improving market for Thoroughbreds beyond racing. Racehorse owners should embrace sport horse buyers and consider them in their breeding decisions. Incorporate cross-training fundamentals into breaking and training programs that make horses that much more prepared to progress into non-racing homes. Avoid the “one last race” mentality with the understanding that putting a sound horse onto the post-track market will increase its value and likelihood of quickly landing in a quality home.

The RRP has documented a 50% increase in the average acquisition prices of horses registered for the Thoroughbred Makeover since 2015. With a commitment to deliver sound, well-developed horses to the post-racing market, this will continue to improve.

With demand for the Thoroughbred sport horse on the rebound, we need to make a concerted effort to improve traceability—especially beyond racing; conditioning ourselves to file “Sold as Retired From Racing” and reliably transfer ownership. Aftercare organizations are doing their best to complete this process, but as the majority of horses are still exiting racing directly to their next homes through their connections, we are dependent on tracks, training centers, listing agencies, and horsemen’s groups to help educate their communities on the importance of this process. This will only become easier as paper certificates age out in favor of microchip implants. This will not only improve accountability for non-racing owners but also improve how the Thoroughbred is represented in sport, which will be key in continuing to drive demand by promoting the breed’s contributions and influence. **B**

## Milestones in Aftercare

A summary of influential events and founding of some of the industry’s most well-established programs

