

First Congressional Hearing Held on Thoroughbred Welfare

Panel members blast the racing industry.

June 20, 2008

On June 19, a congressional subcommittee held a hearing entitled "Breeding, Drugs, and Breakdowns: The State of Thoroughbred Racing and the Welfare of the Thoroughbred Racehorse," where panel members blasted the horse racing industry for its treatment of Thoroughbreds. The subcommittee cited steroid use in horses, bad breeding practices, inhumane shoeing techniques (toe grabs), and greed as among some of the reasons why the panel is now considering endorsing a central governing body for the sport.

The New York Times quoted Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who chaired the congressional hearing, as saying: "The best racehorses in the sport no longer make money for their owners on the race track—they now make money in the breeding shed. The breeders no longer have an incentive to breed horses that are sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of racing, and instead, promote fashionable, but unsound, bloodlines that are known for precocity and speed," she said.

Rick Dutrow, the outspoken trainer of Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner Big Brown, was scheduled to testify at the hearing, but he never made it to Washington. Schakowsky reprimanded Dutrow for his absence. "He never notified anybody on this committee staff," she said according to The New York Times report. "I hope in the future he will join us and be part of the solution."

Dutrow has been a central character in the ongoing debate over steroid use in race horses. He publicly acknowledged injecting Big Brown with the anabolic steroid Winstrol, but then later recanted saying he hadn't injected the Thoroughbred since mid April.

The controversy surrounding Big Brown, and the tragic loss of Eight Belles during the Kentucky Derby, were the impetus behind this first congressional hearing. More hearings are expected.

The racing industry got more bad press earlier this week when news broke that a high number of racing Thoroughbreds are breaking down on the track. According to an Associated Press report, last year the racing industry saw three Thoroughbred deaths a day and 5,000 deaths since 2003. The vast majority of these horses were put down after suffering breakdowns on the track, according to the AP report.

Representative Cliff Stearns, a Republican from Florida who is on the congressional subcommittee, said Congress is ready to rein in the racing industry to protect horses. "This is a wake up call for you," he said. "There's abuse in your industry. You know that."