

A way for racehorses to retire in comfort

By Amy Worden

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Wrapped in a windbreaker, horse trainer Kate DeMasi stood on the rail at Philadelphia Park on a recent morning, bracing against a raw drizzle and watching an exercise rider work his mount on the muddy track.

DeMasi, a major trainer at the Bensalem track, was taking stock of her latest prospect, a 6-year-old stallion named Slate.

A few yards away in DeMasi's busy barn, Rumrunnin Purgy, a 3-year-old, playfully nipped at the grooms walking horses past his stall. After three races and one fifth-place finish, a tendon injury had abruptly ended Purgy's career.

Now the dark brown colt was taking up expensive space in the racing barn and needed to move on.

In the past, that often meant being sent to a livestock auction – and, eventually, the slaughterhouse. "Kill buyers" used to drive their vans right onto the track grounds.

Not anymore. "It's a comfort," DeMasi said, "when you've got a horse with an injury, or who is not talented, to not worry about where they go down the line."

That's because, in 2008, Philadelphia Park launched something unusual for a horse track: a zero-tolerance policy on slaughter-auction sales, and a horse-retirement program known as Turning for Home.

"We needed to respond to a PR nightmare," said Mike Ballezzi, president of the Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, which represents owners and trainers at Philadelphia Park. "We needed to find a humane outlet for these horses."

Other tracks donate money for rescuing retired thoroughbreds, but none has a comprehensive, carrot-and-stick approach to dealing

with unwanted horses. Instead of simply banning sales of horses to slaughter auctions, Philadelphia Park has a full-service adoption program, supported by trainers, jockeys, the horsemen's association, and the track management.

Turning for Home began with \$100,000 in seed money, split between the horsemen and the park. Under the program, trainers must kick in \$10 per horse per race; jockeys, \$5 if they win or finish second.

Those mandatory contributions were easier to make, Ballezzi said, because times were good at the track. The Parx casino, right next door, is a glittering reminder of a big reason why: legalized slot machines at Pennsylvania tracks have tripled purses and have been a boon to the industry.

The horsemen's association acts as the retirement program's administrator, equine social-services agency – and cop. Trainers caught sending horses to auction get their licenses pulled and are banned from racing at Philadelphia Park, Ballezzi said.

So far, 350 horses have been placed in the program, the vast majority finding new homes and new jobs as show or polo horses or as pasture pets. Many are sent across the Delaware to South Jersey Thoroughbred Rescue and Adoption in Medford, which works with Turning for Home.

Not every retired racehorse can be saved – about 6 to 8 percent of the horses had to be euthanized because of the extent of their injuries. Administrator Barbara Luna estimates that at least 80 percent of the track's retiring horses go through the program, but says it's hard to know an exact number because horses are so frequently moved from track to track.

"This is the first constructive thing thoroughbred racing has done to address slaughter," said Christine Berry, founder of the Equine Protection Network, a Berks County-based group that lobbies for state and national horse-cruelty laws.

Other track operators are eyeing Turning for Home as a possible model. Penn National, owner of seven tracks in six states, is "in

discussions about starting a similar program," said Karen Bailey, a company spokeswoman.

Little Cliff's legacy

Philadelphia Park's no-slaughter rule is in part the legacy of a horse named Little Cliff.

In 2005, as a 2-year-old, he sold for \$350,000. Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito touted him as a Kentucky Derby prospect; Little Cliff earned \$200,000 in his racing career, which ended in March 2008 with his last run at Philadelphia Park.

Eleven days later, members of a horse-rescue group found him in the so-called "kill pen" at the New Holland livestock auction in Lancaster County. They identified him from the tattoo that is under every registered thoroughbred's lip.

Zito and his wife put up money to help save Little Cliff. Back when they'd sold him, the couple placed a sticker on his papers imploring future owners to call them if the horse needed a home.

The incident brought a heap of unwanted attention to Philadelphia Park.

"That probably pushed us over the edge and wouldn't happen today," said Luna. "You can't just give away your horses to any Tom, Dick or Harry with a trailer."

Debate has raged over horse slaughter in the nation for decades. Animal-welfare activists see it as cruelty; many in the horse-breeding and agriculture industries say slaughter is a necessary means of disposing of unwanted horses.

Never popular on U.S. menus, horse meat has long been consumed, even considered a delicacy, in countries such as France and Japan – thus creating a demand for what slaughterhouses can supply.

In 1990 alone, 315,192 horses were slaughtered in the United States. By 2007, when the nation's last slaughter plant closed amid legal challenges, that number was down to 58,443, according to the

U.S. Department of Agriculture. But as recently as 2008, more than 100,000 horses were shipped to Mexico and Canada for slaughter, the USDA says.

Anti-slaughter activists want Congress to ban shipping horse meat for human consumption. But some in the racing industry say that without slaughter, more horses will inevitably wind up abandoned or subject to starvation and neglect. "Regulated slaughter should be considered," DeMasi said, adding that while she would never sell a horse at a livestock auction, there are only so many homes for unwanted horses.

"Obviously, we need more responsible ownership," said Alex Brown, a Chester County exercise rider who runs the Web site Fans of Barbaro, the cyber hub of the anti-slaughter movement. "And we're only going to get that if we stop slaughter."

A home in Burlco

Rumrunnin Purgy's next destination is Burlington County, where Erin Hurley, operator of South Jersey Thoroughbred Rescue and Adoption, tends to about 20 Philadelphia Park retirees at a time. Those no longer fit to ride live out their days as pasture ornaments.

Others in better shape, such as Purgy, will get some R&R before Hurley evaluates them and begins retraining them for the show ring, or for pleasure riding.

"They have such athleticism and ability, they can go on to any discipline," said Hurley, who places horses with the stipulation that they come back to her if it doesn't work out.

Her Web site, where you can see Purgy's picture, reads like the promo page of a cyber dating service, full of happy stories of horse lovers finding their perfect equine match in the ranks of retired thoroughbreds.

DeMasi, for one, is pleased Purgy has a chance for comfortable retirement.

He could have raced again at a cheap track somewhere, DeMasi said, but she recommended retiring him before he suffered a more debilitating injury.

Purgy "has a compassionate owner," she said. "He just told me, 'Find him a good home.' "