

Filly's Phony Friends

Eight Belle's and Racing's Critics

- Ray Kerrison

May 9, 2008 -- FOR nearly a week, the country has been profoundly distressed at the horrific destruction of the brilliant filly Eight Belles in the Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs last Saturday.

The best filly in training, valued at close to \$3 million, Eight Belles ran second to Big Brown in America's great thoroughbred classic, leaving 18 colts struggling in her wake - a memorable feat for a young female horse.

But two furlongs after the finish line, as she was being eased by her 20-year-old jockey, Gabriel Saez, she crashed to the ground, both front ankles shattered. Beyond help, she was instantly euthanized.

The spectacle was traumatic, not only for the 157,000 people at the track and the 14.5 million TV viewers who took it in, but for the nation at large, which has been bombarded with graphic accounts of the tragedy and fierce denunciations of the sport that showcased it and the people who work in it.

Eight Belles' untimely death has grief stricken the industry and everyone who loves the running horse. The blanket condemnation of everyone and everything associated with her is so unjust it amounts to a high-tech lynching.

Animal-rights groups, led by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, charged that Eight Belles was "doubtlessly injured before the finish," claimed that Saez is culpable and should be suspended and concluded that horse racing is a dirty, greedy, barbaric money game.

At this time, nobody knows for sure what caused Eight Belles' breakdown. It may never be known. But there isn't a speck of evidence, visual or veterinary, to support the allegation that she was injured before the finish line. In fact, she ran to the wire, full of vigor.

To blame the jockey for her catastrophe, when he was doing what every jockey does in every horse race that has ever been run, is unwarranted and unsupportable. He's lucky to have escaped injury - or the loss of his life.

The Kentucky Derby has been run for 134 years. A search of records and memories shows that Eight Belles is the first Derby horse ever to die in its running. One fatality in 134 years. The record speaks for itself.

Racing driven by greed? Of the 1,200 or so licensed jockeys in North America, "60 percent of them don't make \$30,000 a year," said Terry Meyocks, general manager of the Jockeys Guild. "Many can't even afford health insurance." Some 58 jockeys are permanently disabled. Not much greed there.

The best estimate is that 80 percent of all racehorse owners lose money on their investment. No greed there.

The biggest US track operator, Magna Entertainment Corp., operates Santa Anita, Gulfstream Park, Pimlico and other tracks; it lost \$114 million last year. The New York Racing Association, the flagship of American racing, is in bankruptcy. Some greed!

Don't even bother to ask horseplayers how much money they pull out of the game.

Except for the fortunate few, who stumble on to a champion horse, daily life at the racetrack is enormously difficult, demanding and financially unrewarding. They do it essentially for love of the horse.

Barbaric? More young horses die each year running free in fields and pastures than at the racetrack. Larry Bramlage, the prominent veterinarian, said, "More dogs will be fatally injured taking walks this year than racehorses injured in racing. I doubt we'll stop walking our dogs."

Dirty? Yes, indeed. Like every enterprise, racing has an underside - people who break the rules to gain an edge, especially in the use of illegal drugs. They do it in baseball, football, the Olympics; they do it in racing. It's idiocy to expect perfection.

The safety of the horse has been racing's major preoccupation for years. Tracks in Kentucky, Illinois and California have spent tens of millions of dollars converting their dirt running surfaces into synthetic substitutes of sand, wax and rubber. Early returns suggest these are marginally safer.

The Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation has given more than \$13 million to 32 universities to underwrite 210 projects aimed at improving the health, safety and soundness of horses. The horse is sovereign in racing.

Barring a startling discovery (highly unlikely) in the autopsy now under way on Eight Belles, there is nothing to suggest that her death was anything other than a tragic freak accident, which grieves us all.

Those who'd make more of it may have motives. Ingrid Newkirk, PETA's co-founder and president, said, "If we suddenly make [horse racing] kind of tainted, it will not be really the place to be seen. We want other politicians, other people not to wish to be associated with it."

That's not concern for Eight Belles. That's an agenda.

Ray Kerrison has been a turf columnist at The Post for 31 years.