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Posted: Friday, June 27, 2008 12:50 PM

Suffolk Downs begins zero-tolerance slaughter policy



SAM ELLIOTT
Chip Bott photo
incompatible.”

by **Steve Myrick**

Suffolk Downs has established a new policy holding trainers accountable when their horses are sold for slaughter.

Sam Elliott, the track's vice president for racing, has informed the leadership of the New England Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association that any trainer found to have sold a horse for slaughter will have his stalls revoked and be denied stalls at any time in the future.

Elliott said the plan has the complete backing of Richard Fields, the real estate and casino developer who purchased a controlling interest in Suffolk Downs last year.

“If a horse goes from here to the slaughterhouse, that's completely unacceptable,” Elliott said. “That trainer won't be here. I don't think that's anybody we'd want to have around. Mr. Fields is a strong believer in retirement idea. He's a big backer of it. The two are

Elliott commended local horsemen and several local Thoroughbred retirement organizations for offering several options for retiring racehorses.

“I think it's become a non-issue,” Elliott said. “The best way to make it a real non-issue is to have this kind of sanction in place. That's our policy. My hope is we never have to use it.”

Elliott intends to address horsemen at a general meeting within the next two weeks.

“They would have our backing,” said Al Balestra, president of the New England HBPA. “It's not the proper thing to do, not with all the options they have. There's no reason why that should happen nowadays. There shouldn't be any horses going to killers. It's a different era in racing, it just shouldn't happen.”

Michael Blowen, president of Old Friends Farm in Georgetown, Kentucky, and an outspoken advocate for Thoroughbred retirement issues, said the new Suffolk Downs policy is the best news he has heard in years.

“That's great. I've never heard of it before. You don't know how many horses this is going to help,” Blowen said. “Just the threat of knowing that if they ever found out that you sold a horse for slaughter you could lose your stalls may prevent a lot of this from going on in the first place. The other tracks will start looking at that.”

Blowen noted that it may be difficult to prove a direct link between a trainer and a horse that winds up in a slaughter pen.

“It is hard, it's a nasty circuitous trail, and of course anybody that does it doesn't want to get caught,” he said.

Blowen, who worked as a hot walker at Suffolk Downs in the late 1990s, said he remembers gut-wrenching scenes in the track's stable area of horses being loaded onto trucks bound for slaughterhouses.

“I still think it's an issue,” he said. “It's a problem with every track. Since the fairs have been closed in Massachusetts, it's not as big a problem. It's not that hard to do a better job. All we have to do is find people that are willing to play by the rules.”

Diana Baker, a former Thoroughbred Retirement Fund board member who has been involved with several high profile cases, said the new policy is a positive step but that she believes there are still some horses going from the track to slaughterhouses.

“I hope it's not just lip service,” Baker said. “It would be a breath of fresh air to have someone in racing actually protect the horses.”

She agreed that it may be difficult to make a direct connection between a trainer and a horse sold for slaughter.

“That's a tough call, it will be interesting to see how it plays out,” she said. “It's an open secret how these horses get from point 'A' to point 'B.' The trainers always say they don't know. When you're pulling horses that were trained or owned by the same people over and over again, it doesn't add up, it doesn't make sense.”

Steve Myrick is a Massachusetts-based Thoroughbred Times correspondent

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