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Bill Finley had come to the horse auction in New Holland in search of a story.

“The plan was I would buy a slaughter-bound horse, saving it from an early exit, then research the animal’s life,” recalled Finley of that day in the late Nineties when he worked as a sports writer for The New York Daily News.

He chose a seven-year-old chestnut gelding who was lame in the left front leg and had been purchased by a “killer buyer,” a middleman who would sell the horse to the slaughterhouse. Finley offered the buyer more money than he would get from the slaughterhouse (about \$600 at that time) and it was a done deal.

The next day, Finley traced the tattoo number under the horse’s lip and discovered he had just bought Renaissance Bob, **(photo at right)** a former winner of 10 races, including an allowance race at Saratoga Springs.



Finley had his story. How could a horse who had been cheered on by thousands at the prestigious track like Saratoga Springs, end up being slaughtered and shipped abroad to be eaten by people who see horse meat as a delicacy?

Renaissance Bob’s life was saved and he now lives on a Thoroughbred Rescue Foundation (TRF) retirement farm being sponsored by Finley and his family.

Renaissance Bob loves apples and carrots and is as “gentle as a lamb,” according to Finley who visits with “his” horse as often as possible.

Other steeds are not so lucky.

Each year an estimated 90,000 horses are slaughtered in the United States and processed for human consumption, according to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). In addition, many thousands of live horses are transported in overcrowded double-deck trucks to Canada for slaughter.

The horses are all ages and breeds and come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Unsuccessful race horses, horses who are lame or sick, surplus riding school and camp horses, mares whose foals are not economically valuable, and foals who are byproducts of the Pregnant Mare Urine (PMU) industry that produces the estrogen-replacement drug Premarin. Ponies, mules, and donkeys as well as mustangs rounded

up from the ranges are slaughtered as well.

Many of the horses that HSUS investigators have seen purchased for slaughter were in good health, and bought for only a few hundred dollars.

Last year, at the urgings of leading humane associations, caring people in the horse industry, and the general public, Congress voted overwhelmingly to include an amendment in the agriculture appropriations bill, that would stop the use of tax payers' money to fund United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspections of horse meat.

Without those inspections, the meat cannot be shipped abroad for human consumption, and the slaughterhouses would have shut down. That ban is set to go into affect on March 10, and would last for eight months.

In the meantime, horse-advocates would work on getting a permanent ban on horse slaughter bill passed.

However, on Feb. 7, the USDA announced that it will grant emergency petitions from the three horse slaughterhouses – all foreign owned – asking for permission to cover the costs of inspections at their facilities.

Under the emergency petitions, the slaughterhouses, and not the taxpayers, would be footing the bill for the inspections, and the slaughter of American horses would continue on uninterrupted.

Animal welfare groups argue that there are many alternatives to horse slaughter. Every horse owner they say needs to plan for the entire life of his or her horse. Carefully locating a new home if necessary or donating the horse to a rescue organization. According to the activists, a horse who can no longer live comfortably due to age or illness should be humanely euthanized, rather than suffer the hardships of auctions, and a trip to the slaughterhouse.

Euthanasia should be performed humanely by a veterinarian. Horses' bodies would then be picked up by rendering plants for disposal, buried (where that is legal) or cremated.

"TRF is working hard to educate people in the racing industry that there are places for their horses to go when they are no longer useful at the track," said Finley, now a spokesperson for the non-profit rescue organization based in Shrewsbury.

"We have volunteers who visit small race tracks (often the last stop before horses end up being sold for slaughter), asking owners to please give their horses to us when they no longer want them."

The organization currently has more than 1,300 horses in its care. Some are surrendered by owners, others are rescued by volunteers at sales, and still others are rescued from situations where they have pretty much been left to starve.

"The number of horses TRF has taken in has doubled over the last two or three years," Finley said.

Horses off the racetrack that are deemed sound for riding are retrained to other disciplines such as jumping, dressage, and trail work. Some have gone on to very successful careers in police academies and handicapped riding programs.

"About 65 percent of the rescued horses are too banged up from the racetrack and can not be ridden," Finley said.

Those animals go to families looking for a pet, while others live out their lives on the organization's satellite retirement farms. Horses are only euthanized for humane reasons.

If and when the horse slaughter ban goes into affect, TRF and other horse rescue groups will likely be asked to take in many more animals.

While the groups are more than willing to step up their rescue efforts, they are also reaching out to horse owners to do their part. For example, making financial donations to rescue groups, retiring horses on their own farms, or making sure their retired horses find good homes elsewhere.

“Breeders brought horses into this world, and those horses worked hard for their owners,” Finley said. “They are not disposable commodities or machines, and many of those in the industry need to take more responsibility for the care of their horses.”

For more information on what action you can take now to help prevent the ongoing slaughter of American horses visit the HSUS website at www.hsus.org or the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation website at www.trfinc.org.

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