

# Big Brown's crown better safe than sorry

This year has been a particularly hard year for the horse racing industry.

In May, racing fans and spectators were shocked when Eight Belles, the filly who finished second in the Kentucky Derby, suddenly broke down after the race, shattering both front ankles and forcing her to be euthanized on the spot.

Following 2006 Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro's death in early 2007 (after developing a painful condition called laminitis, as the result of a leg injury in the Preakness), the industry is once again in sharp focus of some sad, and often angry, public attention.

For some, a lot of the sadness was set aside when Big Brown won the Preakness Stakes, making him the latest in a batch of Triple Crown hopefuls. After 30 years, many fans hoped that they would see a Triple Crown winner finally emerge. Given the horse's impressive past victories and undefeated, while still somewhat untested, record, it seemed like a sure thing to many.

They were wrong.

I was among the crowd at this year's Belmont Stakes in New York and recall looking up at the board, which listed the numbers for the top four horses in the field. Big Brown had been holding in third position for some time as the pack surged around the final, sweeping turn. The crowd began to scream; some of the most common mutterings were "Let him go, Kent!" and "You got it!"

A split second later, though, most of us knew something was very wrong. The number one which designated Big Brown's position plummeted off the board and when the crowd turned their heads, there was jockey Kent Desormeaux pulling back on the reins, asking a reluctant, but fairly slow-going Big Brown to ease up and stop galloping. The horse tossed his head and the pair slowly crossed the finish line in last place.

Immediately following the race, most fans speculated that the quarter crack in Big Brown's hoof had reopened. It wasn't until most of the 94,000 spectators reached their cars that they heard the news—Big Brown apparently just didn't want to run. He had showed no obvious signs of struggle. He wasn't overly sweating or breathing heavily, and his heart appeared in good shape, but on the

track he hadn't acted like the Big Brown fans had grown accustomed to watching.

Over the next few days, the media attention grew and fans speculated—what had caused Big Brown to fall short?

Desormeaux was quick to offer an honest analysis of the horse's performance. "He was keen to go on early. He broke so hard," said Desormeaux. "I got him out early and just cantered down the backside. A couple of times, he thought it was time to go and jumped into the bridle. But I had no horse, and when I realized something was wrong, I knew he wouldn't be fifth. He's the best horse I've ever been on, so I took care of him. I thought, in this horse's best interest, let's just get him back to the barn and recharge his batteries."

## Confusing Reports

Other reports came out soon afterwards, although Rick Dutrow, Jr., Big Brown's trainer, was largely silent during the first 48 hours following the race.

It was reported that trainer Bobby Frankel had advised Dutrow to reduce Big Brown's dose of electrolytes, or salts such as chloride, sodium, and potassium, a few days prior to racing. Electrolytes are often recommended to give horses extra energy and stamina, particular performances horses working in hot, humid temperatures, and they also often help prevent dehydration.

In addition, one of Big Brown's shoes had apparently become loose during the race, which could have been potentially uncomfortable, if not painful, to the galloping horse. Big Brown was also reported to be on Lasix, a legal anti-bleeding medication that can lead to dehydration.

Another theory was that Big Brown lacked stamina without a recent dose of steroids. While Dutrow had stated that he didn't feel Big Brown needed steroids before the Belmont, the horse previously had an injection on April 15. In days following the final leg of

The writer, a resident of Stanhope, owns a Morgan mare and spends time volunteering with equine organizations. In March 2008, she self-published a children's novel, "Janie's New Legs." She runs the the Horse Welfare Organizations Website at <http://horsewelfare.8k.com>. She may be reached at [lunar\\_aradia@yahoo.com](mailto:lunar_aradia@yahoo.com).

**Diana Tuorto**  
HUNTERDON HORSE BEAT



the Triple Crown, Dutrow told press members that he would resume Big Brown's regular regimen of Winstrol injections.

One of the other most obvious factors in Big Brown's performance was the weather. With temperatures hovering in the humid 90s at Elmont, N.Y., it was easy to see that most horses were having a difficult race day. This, along with any number of the other factors previously mentioned, could've had a devastating effect on Big Brown's performance.

When most horse lovers were polled, the vast majority stated that while they were disappointed with Big Brown's loss, they were fully supportive of Desormeaux's decision to slow the horse up in the stretch.

"What if Big Brown had had a heart attack?" said Laura Von Glahn of Freehold, a Belmont Stakes attendee. "If you ask your horse to run and there's no run, why push him? There was obviously something wrong with the horse and the jockey did the safest thing possible by pulling him up."

Megan Kiessling of Moorestown also attended the Belmont Stakes and thought that the race finish still could've been handled differently. "I think Big Brown's jockey should have just let him gallop easily the rest of the race under a hand ride," she said. "War Emblem came in 8th in his Belmont attempt. When I saw Big Brown coming down the stretch, it looked like he was fighting pretty hard to move, at least faster than a canter. At the same time, I'm glad Kent Desormeaux didn't beat him senseless to try and get a Triple Crown win."

One of the few voices that initially came out critically towards Desormeaux was one of the most unlikely—Big Brown's trainer, Rick Dutrow, Jr.

"I don't want to hurt anyone, especially Kent," Dutrow told the Associated Press on the Tuesday following the race. "But I still don't understand what happened. I don't see the horse with a problem, so I have to direct my atten-

tion toward the ride. That's all I can come up with."

Others like Nick Zito, trainer of Da'Tara, the 38-1 long shot who won the Belmont Stakes with an impressive wire-to-wire victory, simply wanted to focus on the positive. "I salute Big Brown," said Zito. "He's still a champion and he wasn't himself today. We took advantage of it."

After the tragic death of Eight Belles, and now the surprising finish by Big Brown, more horse lovers than ever are calling for the racing industry to change in order to prevent more injuries and improve the overall quality of life for racehorses.

Kiessling added, "I'm anxious to see artificial footing installed on every track. At the Museum of Natural History in New York, they had an exhibit about the benefits, including a cross section of what is actually in artificial footing. It drains much better, and it's a lot easier on a horse's joints. Other than that, I think they should wait a bit longer to race horses, but that will probably never happen."

Margaret DeAngelis of New Hope, Pa., who boards her horse in Ringoes, said, "I think Thoroughbreds race too early. Their growth plates are not even fully formed. Also, I feel the use of steroids should not be allowed. Look how Big Brown performed when he was off them in the Belmont. Thoroughbreds are being bred with thinner legs, so many animals end up breaking down on the track, not able to stand the pounding. Horses are given very little chance to succeed, especially at the smaller tracks. Once they don't prove themselves, often within a matter of weeks, they are usually sent to auction, most like-

ly ending with a horrific death if purchased by horsemeat buyers. Horses are still thought of as expendable and more will come in due to overbreeding. Most racehorse owners could care less; once a horse does not perform, their response is simply 'get rid of it.'"

So what lies ahead for horse racing? For now, at least, the industry appears to be continuing along as it has always done. Provided he continues to look healthy, Big Brown is preparing to run next in the Haskell Invitational Sunday, Aug. 3 at Monmouth Park, and may meet up with Casino Drive, a contender who was scratched from the Belmont after having a bruised heel, in the Breeders' Cup this fall.

In the meantime, it appears that Big Brown's general welfare has remained the most important factor in his owners' minds. During an interview with The New York Times, Michael Iavarone, co-president of the group that owns Big Brown, stated, "We didn't tell Kent to ease Big Brown, but we're glad he did. Kent was worried about the horse, and we're all glad that he brought him home healthy."

## Help An Ex-Racehorse

To adopt or sponsor an ex-racehorse after their career has ended, please contact ReRun, Inc. at [www.rerun.org](http://www.rerun.org) or (732) 521-1370. To find more horse rescues in New Jersey that need your help, visit my website at <http://horsewelfare.8k.com/new-jersey.html>.

## Contact Us

Send your comments and suggestions for upcoming columns to Diana Tuorto at [lunar\\_aradia@yahoo.com](mailto:lunar_aradia@yahoo.com). ▼