

What happens to... unwanted horses

This week the public contemplated the fate of the thousands of greyhounds which reach retirement in the UK each year but are not found homes by the greyhound charities. An investigation has opened following the revelation that one man in Seaham, County Durham, had slaughtered 10,000 of them over 15 years and buried them in his field.

But what about the nation's racehorses? What happens to thoroughbreds when they don't make the grade, or when owners and trainers judge them unfit for the track? This is about six years old for flat race horses, and about 12 for steeplechasers. "So few racehorses are heard of again after their careers are over," says John Francome, racing commentator and champion jockey.

Five thousand racehorses end their careers each year. This excludes the



Thousands of race horses are slaughtered every year - and they're the lucky ones.
JOHN HIND reports

375 in an average year which are raced to death and the 4,000 foals which are considered not worth the expense of training.

The owners of the 5,000 horses, which are increasingly often syndicates, usually sell up after the glory days end. Retirees meet several fates: leisure, neglect, or slaughter for pet food.

A racehorse is said to cost £5,000 during its first year of retirement - for rehabilitation, vet fees, food and all. Yet the industry provides only £200,000 a year for the care of retired horses, enough to cover about 50.

A few charities try to take up the slack. "I know of one man who has had 16 ex-racehorses in 10 years and beaten every one of them to death," says Carrie Humble, the founder of The Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre in Nateby. After years spent galloping at 30mph,

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a racehorse ideally requires an animal physiotherapist to massage its back, neck and joints for the rest of its life, and for many years to be allowed to "run off" its energy in a comfortable new home. The usual fate of a horse is to be moved from home to home - to a stable employee's home, then his friend's, then the home of a bloke in a pub.

Some horses may adapt to show-jumping. Others may enjoy promotional work (Red Rum went on to open supermarkets), or even have their own fan club (like Desert Orchid, recently turned 27).

But the fate of a large minority of retired British racehorses is an early death, some shot within weeks of their money-earning days ending. Horses may legally only be put down by a vet or licensed slaughter-man and - if not for meat - disposed of through a knacker's yard, incinerator or (with council permission) a burial



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site. The cost to the owner of such disposal is several hundred pounds.

Britain has three official horsemeat abattoirs, the meat from which is sold either abroad for human consumption (especially in France and Belgium) or at home to the pet-food industry. These abattoirs pay as much as £650 for a large thoroughbred. Horse meat is said to provide 50 per cent more calories than the leanest beef and to have a similar, slightly sweeter flavour.

Since March 1, 2006, however, horses sent to abattoirs have legally required an animal passport be delivered with them (tracing any medicinal treatments) and this has caused a 70 per cent drop in business. As a result, more horses are being transported abroad for slaughter and it's believed there's been an increase in unofficial slaughter at home. ■

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