

The Mystique Versus the Reality

FEW AMONG US LIKELY REMEMBER OUR FIRST introduction to a dog or a cat. But a horse? If you don't recall every detail of the encounter, there's almost certainly a photograph tucked away somewhere in a family album that memorializes it. Perhaps you were riding a pony at a birthday party, patting a police horse on a busy city street, or perching on an equine retiree on a neighbor's farm.

The moment's significance stems from the fact that horses aren't common fixtures in the lives of modern-day Americans, so meeting a horse tends to be pretty memorable. But there's more to it than that. You can see the emotions writ large on the face of a child who's meeting his first horse—it's a mixture of wonder, awe, and curiosity, with a dash of trepidation thrown in for good measure.

Horses are big. Very, very big. Bigger than most animals we encounter in daily life. That's the first thing most people notice as they cautiously inch toward a new equine friend. Horses are also strikingly beautiful. Those large, expressive eyes exude a depth of character and intelligence, even in the plainest of horses. The powerful and fluid way a horse moves almost demands admiration and seems to embody the phrase, "poetry in motion." Horses are just different. While cats and dogs, wonderful creatures in their own rights, trigger our "Aww!" response, horses truly inspire *awe*. And, of course, a little bit of "Aww!" as well.

Although humankind has forged many friendships across the divide that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom, our relationship with horses is unique, as are the animals themselves.

In the beginning, the relationship was a utilitarian one. Generally docile and relatively easy to domesticate, horses were used as beasts of burden and machines of war. We human beings harnessed their strength to plow fields and pull heavy loads, and we carried out on their backs our quest to explore and expand our horizons.

As our knowledge grew and technology advanced, horses were replaced with machinery that could transport human beings faster and carry heavier loads. Our relationship changed from one of necessity to one primarily of recreation.

Most horses still have "jobs," however, and are expected to earn their keep in some fashion, whether it's as a backyard pony who gives rides to the grandkids or as a stakes-winning racehorse with millions of dollars in earnings. For many people, the relationship between an owner and a horse may mirror a boss/employee relationship: human beings, as the "bosses," are the authority figures. Owners expect their horses to behave as they've

been trained to do and to follow human beings' instructions. They select horses for their "job openings" on the basis of the animals' qualifications and potential, much as an employer selects a new employee. And owners expect their horses to try hard to succeed in those jobs.

There is a dichotomy in this relationship, though—one with which numerous horsemen struggle. In the past, horses have been thought of primarily as tools, as a means to an end. That mindset has evolved gradually to the point where many of us also consider our horses to be companion animals. Their value isn't solely dependent on what they can do for us; as with our pet dogs and cats, we also enjoy their company and personalities, and we simply love them and care about them. They are important to us because of who they are, not just because of what they can do.

So how to reconcile the roles of working animal and companion animal? Horses don't fit neatly into either category, and the responsibilities and expectations of each may sometimes compete or outright conflict. Most of us consider ownership of a cat, dog, or other pet to be a lifetime commitment, yet horses may have half a dozen owners (or more!) in their lifetimes. Is that wrong? Is it fair to use a horse in a manner that might cause him to become injured, such as racing or jumping? Can a horse be happy kept in a stall, considering that he's a creature found in nature roaming the plains?

One reason we have written this book is to try to help you answer these questions. Our perspective is that of an animal protection organization with fifty years of experience in dealing with the best—and, unfortunately, the worst—of what horses experience in the modern world. We are also longtime horse owners ourselves.

Horsemanship is an ancient art, and one that has remained largely unchanged—the skills that made someone a good horseman five hundred years ago are just as applicable today. But circumstances change, and the ways in which we keep, use, and think about horses are constantly evolving. To be the best custodians of our horses, we sometimes need to rethink old habits as well as constantly reassess our own personal situations to be sure everyone's needs are met.

Think of your experience with your horse or horses as a series of crossroads: you will make decisions that will influence your life and the life of your horse in ways that reflect your view of animals and their role in the world. Your views will come into play when you acquire a horse; when you solve any behavior, training, or medical problems that may arise during your life together; when you decide your horse's future with or without you; and when you decide how your old friend and partner will end his life.

If you're reading this book, it's because these unique and amazing animals have captured your heart. The more time you spend with them, the more fully you will realize that horses are always teaching and challenging you, and, no matter how experienced you are, a horse can always add to your enjoyment and appreciation of life. If you keep in mind that awe and reverence of your first introduction to horse-kind, you'll be well equipped to make the best choices for your equine friends.

There's just something about horses that makes an impact—whether you're a small child stroking a pony's velvet-soft nose for the first time or an adult marveling at polo ponies on a polo field pounding by at top speed. Horses embody traits that humans admire and want to emulate. It's not solely what they can do that draws us to them; it's also what they symbolize.

The Allure of the Horse

Whether nature or nurture is to blame, you'd be hard-pressed to find an elementary-school-age munchkin who wouldn't do *anything* for a pony. In some families, the obsession with horses pops up out of the blue—no one in the family is “horsey,” nor has anyone gone out of his way to introduce Susie to the wonderful world of equines. It may start with a pink plastic My Little Pony, then interest may turn to the long-running Saddle Club series of books and progress to television shows and movies about horses. Soon it's a full-blown obsession that can only be appeased with riding lessons, living in real life the adventures of the Saddle Club's hero and heroines, who learn to ride at Pine Hollow Stables.

Although little boys aren't immune, females are definitely afflicted more frequently by the horsey disease. About 92 percent of the more than twelve thousand members of the United States Pony Clubs, a youth organization dedicated to teaching English riding and horse care, are female.¹ The majority of the thirty-one thousand youth members at the American Quarter Horse Association, a breed organization with a focus on Western riding, are also female.² Some of the inclination toward horses may be innate. Girls tend to include nurturing in their play and may enjoy caring for horses as much as they enjoy riding them.

The benefits of being around these creatures are easy to document. Riding can be a tremendous boost to self-esteem—in fact, horses are often used as therapy animals, not just for riders with physical handicaps, but also for those with emotional issues. Riding therapy has been used to treat everything from eating disorders to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Let's not completely overlook the boys, however. The attraction is just as real—if, perhaps, less frequent—for them, as are the benefits! In the western United States, the cowboy culture is the norm and is more male-oriented than is the formally attired gentility of English-style riding sports. At the highest levels of virtually all English and Western competitive riding sports, men often outnumber women, although both sexes compete in the same events on equal terms—a rarity in modern competitive sports. *The Man from Snowy River*, Kentucky Derby-winning jockey Edgar Prado, or the legendary western trainer Ray Hunt might be a boy's role model.

Adults, of course, are far past the point of youthful infatuation. (Well, mostly.) We're too mature to want to live our own versions of *Black Beauty* or *The Black Stallion*. (Mostly.) But there is still somewhat of a fairy-tale allure...after all, this is the "sport of kings" and of cowboys, too. Think of Prince William and Prince Harry of England on their polo ponies, or John Wayne galloping across endless cinematic deserts of the Southwest.

The so-called English riding sports embrace the stately image wholeheartedly. The competition "uniforms" for many English sports look nearly identical to what riders wore two hundred years ago—highly polished

boots, crisp breeches, and smartly tailored hunt coat topped off with a velvet cap, and the horse decked out in spotless tack, his mane and tail neatly braided. A horse and rider ready to show look like they've just stepped out of an eighteenth-century English painting. Having “the look” is part of the fun of showing.

The Western disciplines call to mind a different fairy tale: the simpler times and romantic cowboy folklore of the American Old West. Don a pair of jeans and cowboy boots; add a pair of chaps, gloves, and a cowboy hat; swing up into a comfy Western saddle aboard a smart and willing Quarter Horse; and you're ready to ride all day on the plains working cattle.

The Reality

In the abstract horses occupy an exalted position in our society. In reality, however, they're not always so lucky. As their champions and caretakers, we bear the responsibility for ensuring that every horse—from a stakes-winning racehorse to a child's pony—enjoys a life befitting the horse's stature in our culture.

Although it's an uphill battle for animal advocates to secure conscientious treatment for all species, horses present a special challenge. For any domestic animal, life is something of a roll of the dice: the quality of his care depends on the resources—and the intentions—of the person he draws in the human lottery. A dog or cat usually only has to take a chance once or twice, since most people who bring pets into their home keep them for the duration of the animals' lives. But every time a horse changes hands, his fate hangs in the balance.

(A note on terminology: Throughout this book, we refer to the person with legal ownership of the horse as the horse owner, by far the most common noun used to describe the relationship between horse and human being. We define the word in our own terms, however: the horse owner to us is also a caregiver, advocate, partner, and guardian—a safeguarder of the horse's well-being, and a conscientious steward.)

Consider this hypothetical example: a Thoroughbred colt is born on a farm in Kentucky, sired by a prolific winner on the track who has just recently retired to stud. The breeder, Owner #1, has carefully matched the stud with a lovely mare and is hoping for the best.

Owner #2 purchases the colt as a yearling for a considerable sum in the hopes that he will have a stellar career on the racetrack.

As a two-year-old, however, the colt's performances are nothing special. Owner #2 sells him (at a considerable loss) to Owner #3, who races horses at the smaller tracks against less talented company. The colt earns his keep, but at the end of his three-year-old year, the owner decides the horse just isn't cut out to be a racehorse.

The colt is gelded and finds himself with Owner #4, a young, professional horseman who specializes in buying horses off the track, retraining them, and selling them to new homes as show horses. The gelding spends six months with Owner #4, learning his new job under this horseman's careful tutelage. The gelding proves to be an amazingly talented jumper, and Owner #4 is thrilled to have found such a diamond in the rough. The gelding is sold to Owner #5, who puts him in training with a professional show jumping rider, looking for a grand prix superstar.

The gelding begins his show career in the lower jumper divisions, rising up through the levels as he gains experience. He wins frequently and shows great promise. He is brought along slowly and carefully, so as not to overface him or cause an injury.

The gelding spends several years with Owner #5 and the professional rider. He makes it to the grand prix classes, the top level of show-jumping competition. He earns a few ribbons at this level, but he seems to have reached the limits of his abilities.

The gelding, now seven years old, is sold to Owner #6, a teenage girl with high aspirations seeking a horse with talent. The pair begins in the children's jumper divisions, eventually moving up into the juniors. The gelding is well within his comfort zone and is able to teach the girl and "forgive" her mistakes.

The two compete together for several more years, earning ribbons and accolades, until it comes time for the girl to go to college. She won't have time to ride, so she sells the gelding to Owner #7, a teenage boy who needs an experienced, talented horse on which to learn to ride. The boy and the horse do extremely well for several years.

By this time, the horse is in his mid-teens and has logged many miles in the show ring. His body is starting to show the signs of this wear and tear. He comes out of the stall stiff some days, and jumping is more of an effort for him than it used to be. The gelding is ready to start slowing down, but the boy has advanced (thanks to his horse's experience) and is ready to move up to the next level.

The gelding is sold to Owner #8, an older adult who competes at a few shows each year but mostly likes to ride at home, take lessons, and go on the occasional trail ride. The workload is a little lighter for the gelding, who is still happy to work but needs a more forgiving job. His owner enjoys the benefit of a well-traveled, older horse who can handle just about anything, but the owner also has to be mindful of the horse's aches and pains and limitations.

Unfortunately, after a couple of years of happy partnership, the owner loses her job to corporate downsizing and needs to limit her expenses. She sells the gelding to Owner #9, an experienced horsewoman whose husband has decided he'd like to ride with her occasionally. As a "husband horse," the gelding goes on trail rides, taking care of the new-to-horses husband.

This arrangement works well for several years, until the gelding, now about twenty, develops a lameness. The owner works with her veterinarian to treat it, but the gelding just never seems to recover fully and isn't sound enough for steady work.

Owner #9 knew this day could come when she purchased the gelding. Some horses remain rideable until the day they die; others develop conditions that don't interfere with their everyday comfort, but are enough to keep them from being ridden. The owner is prepared to let the horse live out his days on her farm and to be the horse's final owner.

With so many years of service and instruction to so many different riders, the gelding deserves to retire in comfort at the end of his serviceable years.

Changing Hands

The above hypothetical example is a best-case scenario for a horse who changes hands over and over again. A well-bred, well-mannered horse had a couple of different “jobs” early on until he found the one for which he was best suited. He was served well by horsemen who trained him expertly, giving him a good chance at a long, healthy, and productive life in service to the human beings crossing his path. These horsemen kept the horse’s well-being in mind and found him a career where he could use his talents to their fullest. Although various circumstances led to the horse’s being sold many times, his owners took care to find him suitable homes. When he was no longer sellable, he had a conscientious final owner who assumed responsibility for caring for him for the rest of his natural life.

But there were a number of crossroads in this horse’s journey where he could have been sent down a much different path. Each time he changed hands, the old owner was putting his fate in the hands of the new. If just one of this horse’s nine owners had not had the horse’s interests at heart, his life story might have turned out dramatically different.

The horse industry in the United States is vast and varied. According to the American Horse Council, there were approximately nine million horses in this country in 2003, the most recent year for which figures are available. There is no central equine registry, no universal identification number for a horse. Even those horses who are registered with various individual organizations often don’t keep the same names throughout their lifetimes, making it very difficult for former owners to keep track of them. On equine discussion forums on the Internet, one can often find people looking for a horse they owned years ago, wondering where he is and how he’s doing, if he’s still alive, even regretting that they sold him and wanting to buy him back.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with selling a horse. After all, most people buy their "horse of a lifetime" from someone else—knowledgeable and talented breeders and trainers develop these horses for the rest of us. But the process is also fraught with uncertainty, and there are horror stories aplenty.

As our example demonstrated, there are countless reasons why people decide to sell their horses. Sometimes it's a matter of choice, and sometimes it's outright necessity.

Growing Pains

There's no such thing as a "one size fits all" horse. The perfect horse for a beginner isn't always perfect for an advanced rider. The tiny pony who's well suited for a small child becomes much less suitable when the child is taller than his parents. Riders who have outgrown their horses—in either size or talent—account for many of those "for sale" fliers hanging on tack shop bulletin boards.

This is especially true for the littlest riders. Many budding equestrians begin their riding careers on ponies, who are easier for those with small hands and short legs to manage and much closer to the ground (in the event of their riders' inevitable falls).

But if you think keeping a sprouting child in clothes that fit is frustrating, imagine the difficulty in keeping that child appropriately mounted. The pony likely doesn't care (an old rule of thumb dictates that most equines can comfortably carry 20 to 25 percent of their body weight). Long before a child is too heavy, however, her feet will dangle well below the pony's belly. From such situations was born the phrase seen in many advertisements for horses for sale: "sadly outgrown."

It's not just physical growth that can end a partnership, however. Riders grow in their abilities as well.

The horses who taught most of us to ride are saintly creatures, perhaps not fancy or much to look at, but invaluable for their patience and

forgiving natures. These horses tolerate inadvertent jabs in the side or bumps in the mouth from unsteady new riders and tread carefully so as not to squash the feet of humans who haven't yet learned to move out of the way. Above all, these horses take care of the riders until the riders are able to take care of themselves.

As riders advance, however, and want to learn new skills or compete in a chosen sport, they may believe they need a horse with different qualities from those that make a horse an excellent teacher for beginners. It's a conundrum that an ambitious rider can encounter as well while aspiring to be a better—or more competitive—participant. Some equestrians are fortunate enough to find a horse whose interests and talents dovetail with their own and with whom they can advance in tandem. Others, however, have to face the choice between sticking with their partner and following their own goals as riders.

Reaching this crossroads isn't indicative of a failing in the horse. Quite the contrary: often, a horse has done his job so well that the pupil has surpassed the teacher. Some horses are best suited to activities requiring only moderate athletic skill; others have talent and potential limited only by their pilots' aptitudes. In some instances a horse may not be able to perform at as high a level as a rider wishes—he might be capable of completing a twenty-five-mile endurance ride, but not a fifty-miler.

Outgrowing a horse can be really heartbreaking—for many riders, that close partnership between human and horse is what attracted them to riding in the first place, and it's sad to have to close the book on a relationship with a particular horse.

When all parties involved handle the situation responsibly, however, it can actually be a happy and exciting, if bittersweet, time. A horse or pony can use his talents to help another rider learn and advance, while a rider can use the skills imparted by a treasured old friend to reach new goals. Ideally, both horse and rider go on to shine in their now-separate roles.

Changing Priorities

Sometimes the circumstances that lead a horse and rider to part ways aren't foreseen as easily. It may seem incomprehensible to those of us who have been smitten with horses for decades, but people—especially children and young adults—*do* lose interest in horses and decide to follow other pursuits.

Being a dedicated rider is *hard* work. For every hour spent riding, there might be two or three hours of grooming, tacking up, cooling down, and commuting back and forth to the barn (if you aren't fortunate enough to be able to keep horses at home or nearby). Riding isn't a twice-a-week sport if you have your own horse. Your horse needs to be ridden almost daily. There's no "off season"—even if a horse is given some time off, he still needs grooming and other attention. It's a lot of responsibility for a young person, and a huge time commitment during a period when most kids are hanging out at the mall or instant messaging their friends.

So the choice is made to move the horse to a new home. With luck, these situations work out better for all parties involved: the horse can enjoy the attentions of someone who makes him a priority and his skills can be put to good use, and the previous owner is free to pursue other interests.

Younger riders aren't the only ones who find that life's changes force a reevaluation of their life with horses, of course. The trappings and responsibilities of adulthood bring their own challenges and tough decisions.

Sometimes, the decision to put a horse up for sale isn't made willingly, but is forced by finances. Drastic changes in one's circumstances—losing a job or going through a divorce, for example—may lead to drastic reevaluation of priorities and to selling a horse who might otherwise never have been for sale.

A Good Beginning Doesn't Guarantee a Good Ending

In an ideal world, when horses are sold, they are passed from home to home like treasured family heirlooms. Each owner treats the horse gently

and lovingly, caring for him attentively so that he can go on to be enjoyed by yet another family if circumstances require it.

When responsible and caring owners decide to sell, certainly they *hope* the new home will be just as good as, if not better than, the current one. But do they ever entertain the possibility that it will be worse?

Ignorance is bliss. Everyone prefers to focus on the positive and minimize the negative. But when another living being's life is in your hands, you don't have the luxury of sticking your head in the sand and simply trusting that everything will turn out okay. As difficult as it may be, owners need to be aware of what *could* happen, and weigh the risks and take steps to minimize them, before handing over the lead rope to someone else.

Is it frightening and depressing to consider such worst-case scenarios? Absolutely. If doing so makes you afraid to sell a horse at all, you're not alone. Although some people claim that buying and selling is simply part of owning horses, there are plenty of individuals in the horse world who eschew that businesslike approach for a very simple reason: they don't want to take the risk, however small, of their horse's landing in bad situations.

Let's look at another hypothetical "life story." A young Quarter Horse foaled on a Plains state ranch is started under saddle by a good, low-key horseman, then ridden on the ranch for everyday work for five years. He learns useful skills such as loading in all kinds of horse trailers, standing like a stone while being mounted or tied, and acclimating himself to pretty much any experience the West can offer. At age nine, he is purchased by a horse trader who makes up truckloads of horses sent east to be sold as quiet trail horses or "kid horses" through a network of horse dealers. Our horse is in good health, about fifteen hands tall, but nothing fancy to look at and with no particular aptitude other than his quiet nature. A young, intermediate-level rider in Pennsylvania who is looking for a safe horse to ride, but without many lessons under her belt, buys him. All goes well for a few months, until a motorcycle backfire startles the horse while they are crossing a road. He bolts down the trail for a few hundred feet before his rider can manage to stop him. This shakes her confidence. She begins to

grip her reins rigidly every time she rides outside the riding ring, making the horse more and more tense, until, instead of walking quietly under saddle, he develops a jiggy little trot step to get away from the pressure of her heavy, unyielding hands. Rather than consult a trainer or instructor to help her fix her problem (which is a direct result of her own riding inexperience), the owner begins to ride less and less. She eventually sells her horse through a local newspaper ad to a young man who doesn't mind the jiggy trot. In fact, he likes it, gunning the horse forward on every ride, only to jerk him to a halt like cowboys do on TV—twenty times a ride. This treatment basically deadens the horse to the rider's cues and makes him so nervous and jumpy that he becomes a real challenge to ride. In a year the so-called cowboy has lost interest and sends the horse to a local auction. An experienced trainer could retrain this horse into a safe, enjoyable riding animal, but Quarter Horses without such "issues" can be had for six hundred dollars apiece. Why should the trainer put the time into this eleven-year-old? At the auction the local equine rescue volunteer has to pass him up (too many horses, too little cash); the owner of a lesson barn thinks he is too difficult for her beginner students to ride, and the only bidder is the local "killer buyer." The horse is loaded on a truck with a bunch of other unwanted horses destined for a slaughterhouse somewhere, only halfway through what should have been his normal life span, and that's the end of the story.

What Can Go Wrong

Such an ending is shocking and dramatic and deeply unsettling. But it's not the only unseemly end our old friends may encounter, and when horse slaughter is successfully outlawed in the United States, even that milestone won't guarantee safety for our horses.

No, there are much more mundane dangers out there, such as simple lack of food and improper care. Every year there are highly publicized incidents where dozens of horses are found starving in a field, in horrible states of neglect. In some cases the owners simply don't care; in others

they have good intentions, but are either uneducated and don't know any better or are overwhelmed and have been unable to stop their horses' downward spirals toward ill health. In the happier instances, animal-control officials step in before the situation becomes too dire, but often, such cases only come to officials' attention when horses are near death.

Neglect usually arises from ignorance. Sometimes owners aren't aware that most horses can't simply subsist off the land year-round and fail to provide enough hay when pasture isn't adequate, or they don't provide horses with appropriate shelter from the elements. They might not be aware that horses' teeth need periodic floating, or that their hooves need regular trimming.

Despite their size and strength, horses are relatively fragile creatures, and certain horses are especially so. If a horse who tends to be a hard keeper becomes slightly underweight as winter sets in, her condition can deteriorate rapidly during cold weather when she's burning calories just to keep warm. And if the mare's uneducated owner doesn't know that a heavy winter coat can hide protruding ribs that would be easily seen in summer, the mare could be in a shocking state by the time she sheds out in the spring.

Although the results may not always be as obvious as when horses who are starving to death, lack of knowledge is usually at the root of most horses' suffering, both on the ground and in the tack.

Ignoring the importance of proper grooming can lead to thrush in the hooves (and, likely, lameness) or painful cases of rain rot, an infection of the horse's skin. Asking a horse to perform strenuous work that's beyond his level of fitness can lead to injuries, colic, or tying-up. Ill-fitting tack can lead to painful rubs and sore backs and mouths. These issues are easily prevented (or, if discovered early, quickly remedied), but if an owner doesn't know better, the horse will suffer.

All horse folk start out knowing nothing: being a new horse owner doesn't automatically make one a *bad* horse owner. The problems arise when owners don't realize how much they *don't* know and don't seek guidance or education.

A lack of education in the saddle can lead to problems as well. The idea is to learn and improve throughout the process, ideally with the help of a qualified instructor. When riders don't continue along that learning curve, their horses are sentenced to a life of amateur mistakes—caught in the mouth by the bit because of a rider's uneducated hands on the reins or thumped endlessly on the spine by riders who haven't developed a balanced, educated seat. While the horse might not suffer much physically from this behavior compared to other abuses, such repeated injustices take a mental toll and lead to horses who have soured on their jobs and no longer enjoy their work.

Abuse and mistreatment aren't solely the domain of the uneducated. They're there—in subtle and blatant forms—at all levels of horsemanship. Selling your horse to a well-known show barn or a “big name” trainer doesn't guarantee she'll be treated well. It could be argued that the unscrupulous horsemen who perpetrate abuse in the name of competition or a quick sale bear more responsibility than their lesser-educated counterparts, because the former know better and do it anyway.

Some of the most egregious examples have actually occurred at the highest levels of the competitive equestrian world. In the 1990s several prominent riders and trainers in the hunter/jumper world were convicted of charges related to having their horses electrocuted by a killer-for-hire to collect on the horses' insurance policies.

Other practices of unscrupulous individuals on various show circuits include withholding water to make a horse quiet, tying a horse's head up high all night so he will carry it low during competition the next day, administering pain-masking drugs so an injured horse can continue competing, and shooting off fire extinguishers at a horse when schooling at home to encourage an “up” look in the ring.

Clearly, the ribbons hanging on the tack room wall don't always signify how well the horses are treated.

Horse Trading Roulette

It's rare to be able to track a horse throughout her lifetime and all her various homes. More often, former owners are left wondering "what-ever happened to...," and new owners are in the dark about their horse's history.

Buying and selling will always be a part of the horse world. But just because it is common doesn't mean horse folk should be cavalier about it. If your horse spun the new owner roulette wheel, how would you feel about her chances of landing somewhere that would provide her with the same kind of home you do? What about her second, third, and fourth spins of the wheel after that? Would her luck run out at some point?

Although the majority of horsemen are good people who try to do right by their animals, there will always be exceptions. There will always be facilities that you drive by and shudder to think about the lives of the horses there, or the riders you can't bear to watch. Sadly, many of those horses likely have former owners somewhere who would be equally appalled on behalf of their old friends, if they had any idea where they were.