

Enslaved!

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***WARNING!** Some people reading this article may think I'm taking an unfair swipe at various aspects of the horse world and those people who are involved with horses in one way or another. My only intention in writing this piece was to have a good, hard look at "what is" and compare that with the now outlawed, and rightly so, industry of human slavery; then ask you, the reader, if you can help the horse.*

Once it was considered 'right' to own another human being and to have them do all manner of things as slaves. This allowed the owner to further themselves in financial, material, or aesthetic ways. The law then allowed such arrangements and indeed entrenched attitudes and regulations that today we are only legally allowed to apply to our animals.

Aspects that usually go hand in hand with slavery are abuse, cruelty, denial of rights and denial of natural justice. Of course there were many examples of slavery where these things did not occur, but the concept and reality of slavery is well associated with atrocities of all types. Over time, slavery was abolished. This, I feel, was a great step forward to a fairer, more understanding and compassionate humanity. Civilization *is* on a journey. We *are* generally moving forward. We demonstrate time and time again the goodness that exists, that can exist and that is capable of being created, especially in times of need.

However if we closely examine what and how and why we do the things we do to our animals, especially in this case our horses, such scrutiny may reveal that, sadly, horses do, often and regularly, suffer in their enslaved relationship with humans even today. The horse community now has a great opportunity to 'free the horse', or at least make an acknowledgement that they are indeed enslaved to us and if that overall situation of enslavement isn't going to change then alter the conditions of that enslavement to give the horse dignity and a life that meets its natural horse needs.

"Just because we can, doesn't mean we should" is an apt saying that applies to so many things we do to and expect of our horses.

A certain smugness that we have progressed may be felt by many of us when we look back in history at the cruel, barbaric and inhumane ways humans of the past treated animals, and also fellow humans, compared to the way we do nowadays. Can this be justified? Are we that good these days? Russia, for example, even today has no federal legislation to protect animals and we only have to scrutinise factory farming of animals, live sheep export, battery hens and the demand on animal shelters to realise that our own back yard isn't that pretty either.

To Whip or Not to Whip?

When I witnessed the debate a couple of years ago about the use of whips on racehorses I had great difficulty understanding why, in this day and age, such a debate was being had at all. Something is very wrong when firstly whipping, beating or hitting an animal is condoned in any way, shape or form, let alone occurring in what has been loosely described as a 'sport'. The initial outcome of the 'whipping' debate was a set of restrictions placed upon jockeys as to how many times they could hit their mount, when they could hit it and how hard. The whip was even redesigned and called a 'humane whip' (which is an 'A' class oxymoron if ever there was one). And the horse racing industry squealed loud and strong until the restrictions were eased and the jockey was able to whip more than in the revised proposal but less than was originally allowed.

However, there is no evidence to indicate that 'humane whips' cause **no** pain or damage.



Apart from the fact that it has been methodically and statistically proven that whipping, beating or 'batting' if you like, a horse hinders its performance and it is therefore less likely to win a race, why is it considered acceptable to hit, whip or bat the horse in the first place?

See <http://www.animalaid.org.uk/h/n/CAMPAIGNS/horse/ALL/596/>

To my mind whipping a horse, in any activity or discipline, is totally unacceptable. Not surprisingly, this view is shared by many who mainly exist outside the activity of horse racing.

A person once told me that whipping a racehorse was "just to urge it on". So, we have a field of racehorses and jockeys heading for the home straight and they all get 'urged on'. This same person in the same discussion also stated that "racehorses liked to run". But they also needed *urging on*! What was even more disturbing about this conversation was that the person I was having it with was a well respected horse veterinarian, who happened to own a few gallopers as well. Could there be a conflict of interest here?

Veterinarians do swear to **"to practise veterinary science ethically and conscientiously for the benefit of animal welfare"**, but the national association and individual vets in Australia accept that whipping a horse is okay.

Using pain in an effort to control or force an animal, especially in a 'sport', is coarse and morally repugnant to anyone with respect for animals, especially in this day and age.

A parallel with the above situation might be a doctor who owns a band of slaves and is also involved in the cotton plantation industry of the 1850's in Louisiana, or a sugar plantation owner in Queensland in the 19th century using kidnapped South Sea Islanders - or a cattle station owner in New South Wales, during the same era, using aboriginal children as their slaves. (See Shirleene Robinson's book called *"Something Like Slavery?: Queensland's Aboriginal Child Workers 1842-1945"*).

For the slave owner it was provident that his slaves were well cared for, healthy and fit. It was also a requirement that they worked very hard in the plantation and toe the line, so to speak. It was perfectly acceptable for the slave owner or his employees to physically hit the slaves with a whip if they needed *urging on* and if they didn't perform or misbehaved, then to give them a right proper beating. Slaves, horses, 1850, 2011???

Interesting, isn't it, that a whip was commonly used on slaves then, just as whips are commonly used on racehorses today....just to urge them on, I suspect.

A Bit Painful!

Also condoned by veterinarians, authorities and many in the wider horse community is the use of bits in the mouths of horses. Indeed some disciplines mandate the use of these pieces of metal of various designs for horse riders to be involved in the chosen activity.



This is rather bizarre given the abundance of sound, irrefutable scientific based veterinary medical evidence of the physical trauma and behavioural problems bits in the mouths of horses cause. Why aren't people taking notice? To entrench this acceptance of bits a leading horse magazine in Australia recently ran an extensive four edition series on the selection and use of bits, thus legitimizing to the horse world the use of these archaic, damaging and cruel implements of 'control'. Adding salt to the wounds, they had a front cover shot of a bit as well!

Slaves in days of past were shackled and fettered with steel. These contraptions were for 'control'. The people responsible for the slaves' security did not want them running away or running amok. For the horse with a bit in its mouth, it is very much the same situation. Control and subservience through the application of, or threat of, pain.

"Equipment or gear used during training or performance should not cause distress, pain or injury to the horse on which it is used". Australian Veterinary Association policy on horse welfare. Current policy, January 2011. First ratified 01.01.1997

The widespread use of bits in the horse world today is despite overwhelming evidence that they are detrimental to the horse and despite countless situations where horse owners and riders have successfully sought a more gentle, more humane and less damaging way of communicating with their steed. Bitless riding, and to a lesser degree bitless driving, does work and so often solves many 'behavioural' issues that develop in horses through the use of bits. Horse owners, riders, veterinarians, horse club committees, organisations' executives in so many cases simply refuse to do what is better for the horse - to take the metal from their mouths - and encourage horse owners

to develop a relationship with their horses based on trust, not fear. Anyone can do it, just as anyone could change the way they thought about keeping slaves.

It is up to each and every one of us to see the truth, even if we may feel uncomfortable or be disturbed by it.

Choice?

Such a liberation of the horse's mouth does not have to involve loss of face. All that is required is for individuals to try taking the bit out in a controlled environment, and with the understanding that it is better for their horse. They may have to learn new skills and new ways of communicating with their horse rather than relying on pulling on their mouths. For organisations such as the EA (Equestrian Australia) or the ACDS (Australian Carriage Driving Society), it's just a matter of changing the rules and allowing bitless riding and driving as an option. Anyone can liberate their horse's mouth!

Any slave owner in the past could grant their slaves freedom - and many did. Others were forced to, once humane pressure saw the introduction of laws banning slavery.

Liberating the horse completely from being enslaved to humans may not happen overnight, or it may not happen at all. But as many slave owners did realise, treating their charges with fairness, dignity, compassion and meeting their needs fully, allowed a much healthier and deeper relationship to exist between mas'r and slave. Even after freedom was granted, slaves often stayed with their previous owners because that was where they felt comfortable, well cared for, secure and loved, and respected.

A truly free horse today is a horse that lives in the wild. No fences, no human agenda, no rugs, no veterinary intervention, no processed food, no shoes; just running barehoof and totally free. Wild horse herds are all over the world where space is sufficient, where the will of humans has been to allow them to be free. That is until or unless they are judged by humans to be either a resource, a pest, breeding out of control, a threat to the environment or 'just not natural'. See *what the Bureau of Land Management is doing with mustangs in USA on land set aside for wild horses and remember what happened at Lake Gregory in WA last year.*



I say 'judged' here to emphasise the point that one only has to look at how we are relentlessly taking over the natural environment with *our* development, environmental damage and uncontrolled population increases.

Humans, I feel, are a much bigger threat to their own kind, a much more damaging pest and a much more dangerous threat to the environment than feral horses could ever be



Even today some humans see these wild horses and think that they are a resource that can be of some use to us, either as food (for us or our pets), or as pets themselves; and in the process kill them or subject them to a life of slavery in our paddocks, yards and stables.

Humane Treatment?

Another sad indictment is the reality that the domestic horse is today regularly and consistently treated as poorly and as unfairly as the slave of past dark ages.

They are caged. They are forced to work. Their children and partners are taken away from them with no regard for family or social bonds that exist within horse herds. They are weaned well before they would naturally so that breeding can continue or the mare can be put back into work. They are beaten, they are fed food that is unsuitable and insufficient to maintain good health. Their bodies are interfered with and human



invented contrivances are nailed onto their hooves. They are used for our entertainment in activities that are damaging to their bodies and their minds, (think rodeo, jumps racing, eventing, show jumping, flat racing, polo, endurance etc, and even trail riding). They are treated as a commodity for speculation, for gambling and for the pampering of the egos of their owners. If they do not measure up for the task assigned to them by their human, they are disposed of, traded, dumped or killed.

Do you care?

Not enough people really care. For if enough people really did care, the life of the horse, though even still enslaved to humans, would be much better than it generally is today.

And if you think, this doesn't apply to yourself because you only take your horse on the occasional trail ride, think again. I did! Slavery, no matter by what degree is still slavery nevertheless.

There are of course many 'vested interests' in maintaining the status quo as it is now. The veterinary industry does very well indeed from the widespread abuse, both overt and subtle, the use, misuse and mistreatment of horses. Just think that if it were illegal to keep a horse within barbed wire (an invention of World War 1 to keep the enemy out), how much less would vet services be needed? If horses were allowed to eat naturally, food that actually suited them, how much less would the vet be needed to treat colic? If horses were given timely and appropriate hoof care and allowed to live in an environment for which they are genetically adapted, there would be much less hoof pathologies requiring veterinary attention. The horse vets' clientele is largely made up of the racing, the jumping, the eventing, the endurance, the buck jumping, the stud breeding and the harness racing industries. Are these the areas where the enslavement of horses is harshest?

The Australian Veterinary Association also supports the racing of two year old horses despite the fact that a horse's body does not fully mature till age five or six. Can they really ignore the damage that is done to immature horse bodies by the rigours of racing? They support the use of whips on racehorses. They support the activity known as 'jumps racing' (that sadly kills many horses each season) and they believe that horses can be kept unexercised in urban areas as small as one acre. Yes, according to today's veterinary thinking, it's okay that a horse is raced as a physically immature juvenile, that they live alone on a small block of land and that they be whipped "to make the horse perform more competitively".

Vested Interests

There are other vested interests in this enslavement of horses. The vast array of supplements, lotions, potions, oils, gear, horse clothing, protection equipment and herbal mixtures that are manufactured and sold today is staggering. It's big business. There are rug manufacturers, sellers and repairers. There is the farrier industry, the dental industry, the body work industry, the drenching industry and the list goes on. What happens to the wild horse if they miss out on this stuff? Nothing! Why is the wild, free horse able to exist without all of this and yet the domestic, slave horse is in such great need?

Or are they?

Do we feel that we must do all this, supply all this stuff to appease our deeper conscience that is telling us that something is really, really wrong here?

Veterinary Oath (Australia)

I solemnly swear to practise veterinary science ethically and conscientiously for the benefit of animal welfare, animal and human health, users of veterinary services and the community.

I will endeavour to maintain my practice of veterinary science to current professional standards and will strive to improve my skills and knowledge through continuing professional development.

I acknowledge that along with the privilege of acceptance into the veterinary profession comes community and professional responsibility.

I will maintain these principles throughout my professional life.

You be the judge.

Regardless of how we look at the domestic horse, it is a slave. We own it. We determine how and where it lives and the type and level of care it receives. We choose when it breeds and what type of work it does, and how much work it does. We often choose whether it lives or dies. The domestic horse is there for our bidding. It is enslaved to us. We consider it our right to own a horse; and I'm sure that is how slave owners of the past considered their human 'stock'.

If the horse had real rights, what would they say, feel or think about what is done to them these days? Because they are real masters of suffering in silence very little notice is taken of their plight. When notice is taken, resistance to the idea that we are not doing very well by the domestic horse can be very strong indeed.

Until the horse has real rights, they are nothing but oppressed creatures; bred and born and raised to do our bidding. Is this a sign of an evolved society? Do we really respect them as Nature's creatures with just as much right to living their life as fully and as satisfyingly as we think we do?

Veterinarian Oath. USA

As a member of the veterinary medical profession, I solemnly swear that I will use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society. I will strive to promote animal health and welfare, relieve animal suffering, protect the health of the public and environment, and advance comparative medical knowledge. I will practise my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics. I will strive continuously to improve my professional knowledge and competence and to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards for myself and the profession."

Some of The Sad Facts -

- In Australia over 18,000 horses rejected by the thoroughbred racing industry each year end up being slaughtered for pet food or human consumption.
- Over 50% of top level endurance horses are vetted out during competition.
- Pulmonary bleeding is common in racehorses. 50% of racehorses have blood in their windpipe, and 90% have bleeding deeper in their lungs.
- Over 85% of racing horses have stomach and digestive tract ulcers.
- Navicular disease/syndrome is not found in wild horses.
- In a jumps race there is a 1 in 10 chance of injury and a 1 in 150 chance of death for the racehorse.
- Two year old racehorses suffer a high rate of injury from training and racing.
- Horses are whipped.
- Farriers in the US report that over 90% of domestic horses have some lameness.
- Bits cause over 200 clinical signs of bit-induced pain and are responsible for 40 or more dental and interdental pathologies as well as many behavioural issues.

So, what can we do?

There is much we can do about this abhorrent situation. The worst thing to do is nothing.

Or perhaps the first thing we can do is look at how we individually treat our horse slaves. Ask yourself, If you were your horses, would you be really happy? If you were your horse and you had a real choice, would you stay or leave? If you are uncomfortable with your answers, make changes that will create a life for your horse so that he/she would choose to stay, even if the gates were open. Create a life for the horse that earns their respect for you.

We can also become active as an individual or with one of the many organisations that currently seek a better world for the horses. Then lobby, shout, protest, complain, write letters, get on talk-back radio or television and tell our politicians, the administrators of the horses' industries and disciplines and the wider public that we won't stop until the abuse of horses stops. If you'd rather work behind the scenes, then donate what you can to any of the organisations that are doing the work to free the animals.

It is up to us.

After all is taken care of in the home paddock, perhaps we need to focus on one other thing at a time.

- My first target of choice would be 'jumps racing'. It is the epitome of what is wrong with humans and horses today. Protest till jumps racing is no longer allowed.
- We could campaign strong and loud against whipping horses, in any situation, but especially horse racing.
- Then a concerted campaign needs to be waged against two year old horseracing, and perhaps concede, for the time being, that no horse under four or five years old may be raced.
- Take the bucks out of rodeos.
- Take the bit out of pony club. Show our children how to ride and communicate with a horse politely and without inflicting pain on the horse or pony.
- Then the mandatory use of bits in dressage needs to be challenged and, as a first step, changed to "a bit is optional".
- After that, attention could be drawn to the mandatory use of horse shoes on racehorses and press the AJC (Australian Jockeys Club), the ARB (Australian Racing Board) and the state bodies to make them optional.

And that is just the start.

Horse Care and Welfare Organisations:

www.bitlessbridle.com
www.naturalhorseworld.com.au
www.horseracingkills.com
www.animalaid.co.uk
www.questequinewelfare.org
www.animalsaustralia.org
www.triplerequinewelfare.org.au
www.horse-welfare.org
www.edgarsmission.org.au
www.horsewelfaretasmania.com
http://www.equiculture.com.au/page29.html
www.rspca.org.au
www.phhwv.org.au

Hoofnote:

The biggest disappointment after writing this article has been the number of people who read it, agree mostly with it but are too challenged by it to face the reality that we, collectively, do not care enough for horses; or they do not want to stand up and voice their opinion, for whatever reason.

By not speaking up, these people, through their silence, are condoning the ongoing abuse of the animal they profess to love so much.

It was probably because of a similar 'silence' that it took many, many decades to abolish slavery of human beings.

The domestic horses, as well as the wild horses, have long suffered under the hand of humans. That they continue to suffer, even though we use them now mainly for our recreation is a situation that needs swift rectification. We have the knowledge, we have the wealth, we have the space: all we need is the guts and the will.