

The Cruelties of Melbourne's Horse Race Cup: Drinking, Gambling and "Equine Slaughter"

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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If nothing else, the [Melbourne] Cup is always a handy reminder Melbourne's conceit of being Australia's most 'sophisticated' city is a case of pulling a skivvy over a bogan, if not applying lipstick to a pig. Sam de Brito, Sydney Morning Herald, Nov 5, 2014

It seems more than a touch daft. A horse race, with its cruelties, its crudities, and its suggestions, capturing a nation the first Tuesday of every November, with aging commentators doing the rounds over dresses that you can hang coats off and casting about suggestions about odds. Agitated beasts are herded into cages awaiting the spring. But the Melbourne Cup, in terms of money and interest, is only growing.

The Cup has become a cultural spectacle of Australian life, one increasingly dedicated to obliterating sessions of inanity and sozzled intercourse. Workplaces conduct sweepstakes. Parties are organised across the country. The betting halls hum to the tune of cash and punt. A description is offered by *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Sam de Brito: "If it's anything like workplaces I've graced, it's the pisshheads and gamblers followed by the flighty types who get excited over everything except their job".

It is, however, the alcohol consumption that would intrigue the anthropologists. It is done on vast scale, and it is done with committed purpose. "Like Australia Day and Anzac Day, the Cup Day is a uniquely Australian celebration that seems increasingly about getting slaughtered on the drink."

If it had stayed confined to that, well and good. But this Cup did provide another disconcertingly ugly spectacle, one of those uncomfortable reminders to aficionados who dabble and profit from the equine racing industry. While animal rights activists tend to be treated by the horse racing industry as disconnected loons who scant understand the equine heart, their voice was heard over the din. After all, two horses had perished after racing proceedings.

As Racing Victoria's Terry Bailey announced, "The favourite Admire Rakti upon returning to the tie-up stalls after the race has collapsed and died." The seventh-placegetter Araldo broke his leg on a fence following the run, and was euthanized. The animal welfare organisation, the RSCPA, was not impressed. "Events like these are a stark reminder to the community of the real risks to horses associated with racing. This is a tragic outcome for both horses and we expect there to be a full and transparent investigation undertaken into both incidents." [1]

The animal rights activists were getting a slice of the publicity, venting over the treatment of animals in the name of spectatorship. The consequences for the animals engaged in the

race tend to be serious. Injured horses are put down and disposed of. The stresses of travel, and the race itself, are strenuous. "We raced another horse to death," observed Western Australian Greens Senator, Scott Ludlam. "Hope there's plenty of champagne."

Defenders cite the entire racing industry as putative necessity, giving the impression that such tournaments have an inexorable inevitability about it. Animals perish because other animals of the biped guzzling variety must get their fill. But another side of the commentary on such fallen animals is the peculiar suggestion that they race in such tortured settings because they, masochistically, like it. *The Daily Telegraph*, for instance, suggested that, "Thoroughbreds are meant to run. They thrive on it." A bit of animal psychobabble goes a long way, with the editorial observing the enthusiasm of the winning horse, Protectionist, with his "jaunty post-race stroll to the winner's area."

The grief shown for the animals – notably those in attendance of the game – tended to demonstrate mismatched ideas. Were they grieving for the fallen equine combatants forced to run to either an animal's death or a human's glory, or the loss of an asset to the value of hundreds of thousands? The loss of 125 horses last year, as reported by the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses, suggests a heavy toll for a betting industry, and a heavy price for love.

Not so, according to some observers who see the figures as minute. There are 30,000 thoroughbreds racing in the industry, with 20,000 races in any given year. Just over 0.4 per cent of horses perish. "Another way of looking at that is that one horse dies every 160 races." [2] The slaughter, in short, is minimal, but it proves highly reductionist.

Justifications tended to come from those defending what was essentially a highly regulated industry, which is tantamount to suggesting that a regulated arms trade is still a good thing. In the view of the *Daily Telegraph*, "There is probably no sports industry more closely regulated and better policed than thoroughbred horse racing."

With such prevailing views, the general view is that the industry will continue to thrive, and the spectators continue to come. Commentators note that horse racing is peculiarly bound up with Australian nationhood, be it the first race being held in Sydney's Hyde Park in 1810, or the employing of tens of thousands of people. It is, in short, an industry of equine sacrifice that exists for itself.

The Melbourne Cup will continue to be that tormenting race that stops a nation. And the horses will continue being those unfortunate "equine athletes... forced to take part in being flogged around a paddock for the pleasure of 100,000 drunken halfwits." [3]

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/it-was-a-melbourne-cup-for-the-ages/-story-fni0cw15-1227112674697>

[2] <http://www.news.com.au/sport/superracing/melbourne-cup-2014-racing-industry-and--animal-welfare-share-love-of-horses/story-fndpqu3p-1227113216040>

[3] <http://www.crikey.com.au/2014/11/04/yes-i-hate-the-cup-and-for-damn-good-reason/>

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