

# Injuries to racehorses increasing

As more pull out with injuries, fields for big races shrink

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Three hours before the \$500,000 Kentucky Oaks on May 1, Terry Finley faced an agonizing decision. His 3-year-old filly, Justwhistledixie, was scheduled to go off as second choice to favored Rachel Alexandra.

But the filly had a problem. Not a soundness problem, but a tender foot, the result of new shoes. Feeling he had no choice, Finley decided to scratch. The president of West Point Thoroughbreds in Mount Laurel, N.J., wasn't going to risk the filly's future on one race, no matter how big.

"It was a long road to get to the Kentucky Oaks," he said last week. "To not get there three hours before the race was a tough pill to swallow. [But] she was already back to the track six days after that.

"We've always paid attention to our horses and what we're doing."

The health of high-profile racehorses has been front and center in the sporting consciousness since Barbaro and Eight Belles broke down in Triple Crown races during the past three years. Both horses were euthanized, although Barbaro survived eight months after his misstep in the Preakness in 2006 before being put down.

Eight Belles' catastrophic injury after finishing second in the 2008 Kentucky Derby sparked reform throughout the industry, including creation of a Safety and Integrity Alliance that sets minimum accreditation standards. Even before Eight Belles' injury, some racetracks had replaced dirt with synthetic surfaces, including all of California's tracks.

With the 134th Preakness on Saturday, the buildup to this year's major races for 3-year-olds perhaps offered a disquieting glimpse into the future. Justwhistledixie wasn't the only promising young horse to miss a big race.

At least three colts that were or might have been Derby favorites were scratched before the Run for the Roses.

A slab fracture in his knee forced Old Fashioned into retirement with \$583,280 in earnings. Five days before the Derby, Quality Road went out with a quarter crack. And on the morning of the race, I Want Revenge was pulled with a serious ligament issue in his front left ankle.

But there were others, too. Square Eddie and Win Willy were scratched on consecutive days after Quality Road went out. They joined a lengthy - and impressive - group of defections that included Charitable Man, The Pamplermousse and Midshipman, the Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner in 2008.

The list of Derby contenders was constantly being revised.

"That list was more volatile this year than any year I can remember," said Dr. Larry Bramlage, a veterinarian who works Triple Crown races. "Early favorites were on, then out. It was very volatile. Some of it was injury, some of it was not."

While the number of no-shows increased, the types of injuries that knocked horses off the trail were not unusual. There were cracked hoofs, hot spots, some soft-tissue mishaps and a few fractures.

Bramlage said it was part and parcel of the anatomy of young horses. Trainers can condition a horse's heart and lungs without reservation, but the muscular-skeletal system is more problematic.

"Structurally, they're like a suspension bridge," Bramlage said. "Any little problem can disrupt the training of a horse."

The bigger, unanswered question is whether genetics are playing a role in increased injuries and whether this is

a trend to watch.

"We have changed the breed some," he said. "The picture of the average thoroughbred is different. It's a different conformation than we had 30 years ago."

Jeanine Edwards, racing analyst for ESPN and longtime horse observer, suggested breeding is responsible for that conformation.

"I'm not an expert in genetics," she said Wednesday at Pimlico Race Course, "but there seems a trend toward breeding for speed and brilliance. And one of the side effects of that is horses seem to be a little more fragile. They don't run as often as they used to, and they seem to need therapeutic medication between races."

The increase in scratches might also reflect a more cautious approach to a horse's health in the aftermath of Eight Belles' injury. Bramlage said he saw evidence of that in all races at Churchill Downs on Derby day.

"There's heightened sensitivity, and it made people extra cautious," he said.

Finley says his group - and most everyone he knows in the business - has always been sensitive.

"It just doesn't work if you don't care about horses, if you're not constantly putting them first," he said. "Someone might not agree with the decision I make, but just because you don't agree, it doesn't mean you can stick a label on a manager."

Finley said the economic spiral might offer a silver lining for racing. With the downturn in prices, he reasons, the cheaper mares will be taken out of production.

"When the sales were going at full octane - and a guy had a 12-year-old mare that had produced six foals and they either didn't get to the races or had limited success - there was incentive for that mare owner to keep breeding," Finley said. "Now the calculus is totally different. I have to think this is going to help us. There's a stronger filtering process for the kind of mares who've proven they're not producing the kind of horses the industry needs."