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# Bred for Edge, Greatest Racers May Have Handicaps

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Heard on All Things Considered

JOANNE SILBERNER



Timeline of High-Profile Breakdowns on the Track



Pins are seen in the left front hoof of Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner Big Brown at Belmont Park in Elmont, N.Y., June 2, 2008.

*Al Bello/Getty Images*

When Eight Belles' front legs snapped at this year's Kentucky Derby and she was euthanized on the track, it raised alarms throughout horse racing. The filly finished second to Big Brown, the horse that went on to win the Preakness and on Saturday will try to capture the third jewel in racing's Triple Crown: the Belmont Stakes.

But what happened to Eight Belles, Barbaro in the Preakness two years ago, Charismatic's nonfatal breakdown in the Belmont in 1999, and other thoroughbreds in other races have some people questioning whether thoroughbred racing and breeding are in the best interest of the horse. And Big Brown has a cracked hoof that's only added to the questions.

Let's start with that quarter crack. It happens all the time, to racehorses and non-racehorses alike. Untreated, they can be painful and can grow larger. Veterinarian Larry Bramlage, who was with Eight Belles at the Kentucky Derby and is one of the veterinarians on call for the Belmont, says quarter cracks don't lead to catastrophic

events. "The only concern is its effect on performance," he says, adding that horsemen have been treating them successfully for decades.

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Big Brown's handlers are confident that the treatment the horse is receiving — basically, pulling the crack together and gluing on a patch — will be sufficient. Bettors seem to think so. Big Brown is the odds-on favorite.

Ed Bowen is the president of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, which is supported by the racing industry and sponsors research on horse health. He, too, isn't concerned about the quarter crack. "The ability to deal and manage quarter cracks and keep going isn't something that is radical or new or anything like that," he says.

Forty-five years ago, a horse named Northern Dancer developed a quarter crack — like Big Brown — in his front left hoof. He trained on it. As it healed, he raced on it. He went on to win the Kentucky Derby and many other races. And he became one of the most successful sires in thoroughbred history.

In fact, he's a great-grandfather of Big Brown on both sides.

This brings up the second hot equine health issue: genetics. Are breeders breeding in undesirable traits, like the not-so-serious tendency to develop quarter cracks, or the very serious tendency to break legs? Veterinarian Doug Antczak of the College of

Veterinary Medicine of Cornell University says, "My own experience working on racetracks 35 years ago is there were catastrophic breakdowns at that time, and that rate's not much different from what we observe today, but there's very little data historically on that."

In fact, in a sport that has more statistics than baseball, there's no good information on the rate of breakdowns over time. Antczak and Bramlage both say they have seen a change in what breeders are aiming for. Breeders want lighter, speedier horses, horses that can run fast at the relatively young age of 2 or 3. Years ago, there were plenty of big races and big payoffs for 4- or 5- or 6-year-old horses. But now, everything is focused on the Triple Crown races. Stallions are picked as breeders because they've done well in a few early races

Bramlage sees a physical difference in thoroughbreds today. "If you just look at the conformation, the breed has changed," he says. The horses have lighter frames, and "heavier tops." They're built more like sprinters. "They have more muscle and less skeleton, which is very economical for the horse to run fast," he says.

After Eight Belles' breakdown, a sports columnist in *The New York Times* referred to horse racing as the new bullfighting. Some animal-rights groups have called for a ban on racing. And a congressional committee is investigating. Industry leaders have taken notice. The Jockey Club, which maintains the official thoroughbred registry, has a safety committee that's looking into issues such as whether legal steroids are safe and whether track surfaces need to be changed, and it is trying to get a handle on just how many horses break down.

Bowen of the Grayson Foundation says his group is trying to help breeders pick out stallions that have sound, durable foals. They've published some of that information on their Web site. "Our initial thrust," he says, "was to generate statistics that shed light on what stallions and sire lines produced runners that had a high number of career starts compared to the breed as a whole."

He says they're now working on ways to make the statistics more accurately reflect the offspring's durability — removing from consideration horses whose data are

unrecorded because they race in another country, or healthy offspring who are taken out of the racing pool for breeding.

But Bowen acknowledges that breeders aiming for the truly elite runners, the 2,500 or so foals born each year that will grow into the very speediest horses, will still breed for that flat-out speed, that giant stride, that awesomeness that Big Brown has that can take your breath away.

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