

NEWS

Belmont Park: 51 horses died at Triple Crown track in 2020, a 10-year high

A mark higher than the Santa Anita death toll that brought nationwide industry scrutiny.

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Some 51 racehorses died at Belmont Park last year, the largest body count at the Triple Crown track since 65 horses died there in 2010.

Last year was the first in the decade since 2010 that the death toll topped 50 at the Belmont, Long Island, park, best known for hosting the Belmont Stakes.

And 2020's total was seven more than the number of horses that died at Belmont in 2019 – even though COVID-19 stopped racing for over two months last year.

The New York Racing Association, which operates Belmont, is reviewing how the pause on racing from March 19 to June 3 affected training routines for horses stabled at the park.

“This was an unprecedented interruption and we are still analyzing the full scope of its impact, especially as it relates to younger horses,” NYRA spokesman Patrick McKenna told the USA TODAY Network.

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The state Gaming Commission, which regulates racing in the state, is comparing training in 2019 to 2020 in order to analyze how the changes could have affected horse safety, spokesman Brad Maione said.

“If we can identify trends and causation, we can institute controls,” Maione said.

A preliminary review showed many 2- and 3-year-old horses on the fatality list, he noted, although medical analysis hasn't yet identified a correlation to the increase.

But Albany-based activist Patrick Battuello said nothing will change whatever regulators and track owners find in a study or decide to do differently in practice.

Deaths may fluctuate year to year and track to track, he said – but killing is built into the sport.

“The horses have always died on the racetrack and will always die on the racetrack,” said Battuello, whose nonprofit Horseracing Wrongs documents industry-related deaths across the country.

Battuello said since his group began keeping track in 2014, he’s verified through public records about 1,000 deaths per year. He estimates there are as many as another 1,000 deaths annually at private farms and stables that don’t appear on state regulators’ lists.

There is no safe way to run horse racing, he said, with thoroughbreds reaching 1,000 pounds and pushing speeds of up to 40 mph.

“The only answer here is that this has to end: horse racing has to end,” Battuello said.

Despite Belmont’s spike last year, statewide horseracing deaths were down in 2020.

There were 96 racehorse deaths at New York’s 11 tracks last year, two fewer than were documented in each of 2018 and 2019, according to the state Death and Breakdown Database. Before that, statewide deaths exceeded 100 each year dating back to 2009, the earliest totals available on the state database.

Statewide deaths hit a high of more than 200 in 2012.

Context amid scrutiny

Horse racing continues to find itself under intense national scrutiny that began in 2019 after a series of highly publicized deaths temporarily closed the Santa Anita track in California. Thirty-seven horses died at Santa Anita in all of 2019, according to reports.

Belmont’s totals eclipsed that, but the New York track features year-round racing, training and stabling of horses. Industry insiders continue to say context is important when looking at fatalities.

The statistic of fatalities per 1,000 starts is a widely used measure within the industry of how safe tracks are. Belmont routinely trends safer than the national average and better than its Triple Crown counterparts.

The industry group the Jockey Club isn't expected to release the 2020 national average of deaths per 1,000 starts until March, but between 2009-19, NYRA did better than the national average every year but 2012.

Last year's 1.77 deaths per 1,000 starts at all three NYRA tracks – Belmont, Aqueduct Racetrack and Saratoga Race Course – was the highest combined total since 2014, when NYRA tracks had 1.83 fatalities per 1,000.

Last year, only seven of the 51 deaths at Belmont were racing-related, spread out over 515 races in 52 race days. That translated to 1.64 deaths per 1,000 starts. There were 27 training deaths over 34,462 timed workouts at Belmont.

The safety rate of race “starts” and training workouts without incident are above 99% by this measure, but some activists say an average based on the number of starts can make a track appear safer than it is. One horse running in 10 races would be counted for 10 starts in the statistic.

Seventeen deaths at Belmont last year were attributed to “other” causes in the state database, and that could mean anything from a stable injury to colic or other sickness.

Activist Battuello said the industry's focus on fatalities per starts amounted to smoke and mirrors. All horses that die related to the industry die because of horseracing, he said.

“No one has ever tried to draw a distinction between a soldier who died of dysentery and a soldier who died of a battlefield wound,” Battuello said. “The same argument applies here.”

Industry seeks image rehab

Horseracing was aiming for image rehab in early 2020 facing calls for more federal oversight as the sport nationally has 38 state-level regulatory bodies with different rules and policies on drug use.

A doping scandal last March saw some industry veterinarians and trainers arrested before the coronavirus shut down most aspects of daily life.

But the sport received new attention while most pro sports were still on pause and homebound audiences were looking for a distraction from the news cycle.

The recently enacted Horseracing Integrity and Safety Act, which will set federal standards on drug use and other policies, will bring credibility back to horseracing, said Marty Irby of

the D.C.-based group Animal Wellness Action, who pushed for the law.

But the act isn't the only answer, he said.

"I hear more complaints about the whip in horse racing than anything anywhere else just because it seems so archaic," Irby said. "You're in 2021 watching a person literally beat the horse around ... the track."

The Gaming Commission is considering implementing changes to the use of whip or riding crop. NYRA's spokesman said the association supports limiting but not banning whips and adding penalties for overuse. Rules should be consistent between states, McKenna said.

"Skilled and experienced riders do utilize the crop as a primary mode of communication in training and competition, and any new rule should acknowledge that reality in a way that protects riders and preserves the integrity of the sport," McKenna said.

NYRA has taken other recent steps, such as expanding a ban on the anti-bleeding drug Lasix from 2-year-olds to all horses running in stakes races. The main track at Saratoga was renovated last year and an upgraded and expanded training track is set to open in spring.

But deaths continue, with five reported statewide as of Wednesday, including two training related deaths at Belmont in the first seven days of 2021.

Track-by-track deaths, 2020

Aqueduct (NYRA)

9 racing

Belmont (NYRA)

7 racing

27 training

17 other

Saratoga (NYRA)

5 racing

11 training

5 other

Finger Lakes

3 racing
4 training
3 other

Monticello

1 racing

Batavia Downs

1 racing
1 other

Tioga Downs

1 other

Yonkers Raceway

1 racing

Mark Lungariello covers government and politics. Follow him on Facebook @lungariello and Twitter @marklungariello.