

# Churchill: Hiding Saratoga horse deaths conceals truth about sport

Nobody wants to see animals injured, but that's the unfortunate reality of racing

[Chris Churchill](#)

Aug. 29, 2023



New York Thunder is shown racing at Saratoga Race Course in July. The horse broke its left leg racing on Travers Day and was euthanized.

Skip Dickstein

SARATOGA SPRINGS — Faced with growing criticism over the toll of its sport on horses, the New York Racing Association is more aggressively countering its critics.

Before Travers Stakes Day — which was ultimately marred by two horse deaths on Saturday, including one broadcast live on national television — NYRA requested that the city of Saratoga Springs move protesters from the group Horseracing Wrongs away from the entrance to Saratoga Race Course at the intersection of East and Union avenues. The city subsequently asked that the group relocate to the intersection's far corner.

“That just wasn't acceptable, because we'd be marginalized,” said Patrick Battuello, the group's founder, who said the request was a first and one that Horseracing Wrongs rejected.

In a meeting earlier in the week with city officials, including Mayor Ron Kim and Public Safety Commissioner James Montagnino, the protest group did agree to reduce the size of the presence on the corner and move some of its 60 or so protesters elsewhere. Montagnino, who confirmed that NYRA asked to have the protest moved away from the entrance, said the meeting was amicable.

I'd say it's to the city's credit that NYRA didn't get its way, except it shouldn't have even made the request. The sidewalk, after all, is public space. The track is owned by New York state. Protesters have every right to gather there, especially since its prior demonstrations have been peaceful.

“Most of our activists are women in their 60s and 70s,” Battuello told me. “It's not like we're the Proud Boys.”

When the protest occurred, it was met by a small group of counter-protesters from We Are New York Horse Racing, a group backed by NYRA and other industry groups. That also was a first, said Battuello, who believes the demonstrators were trying to goad Horseracing Wrongs into a confrontation that would force police to clear all protesters from the track's entrance.

“It was about trying to get us moved off that corner,” Battuello said. “I have no question that NYRA was trying to muzzle if not silence us.”

NYRA spokesman Patrick McKenna denied that, maintaining that the association respects the rights of protesters. He added, though, that protests have been getting increasingly aggressive in recent years, leading to worries over safety and access.

But if those are NYRA’s worries, why put counter-protesters into the mix? Wouldn’t they only add to crowding and the potential for confrontation? (McKenna said the demonstrators were unpaid and were not NYRA employees.)

Battuello cited other ways he believes NYRA is attempting to quell his group’s effectiveness. He noted, for example, that NYRA recently cited copyright infringement to successfully lobby YouTube to remove a video showing a horse injury from Horseracing Wrong’s channel.

“We’ve never had an issue before,” Battuello said. “Now NYRA is trying to silence us because they’re feeling pressure.”

Horse racing is having an especially bad year. Churchill Downs in Kentucky was forced to suspend racing earlier this year due to horse fatalities. Closer to home, the Belmont Stakes in June was largely overshadowed by a troubling spate of horse deaths and questions about the industry’s safety and sustainability.

McKenna, though, countered that the videos in question belong to NYRA — or, in some cases, Fox Sports — and that the association is doing essentially what the Yankees or Mets would do to combat an unauthorized use. That’s especially true, McKenna said, when clips are used to present an unflattering or distorted view of the sport.

NYRA, which is technically a nonprofit, also edits its video replays to remove segments in which horses are injured. Those moments are traumatic and gruesome, McKenna said by way of explaining the decisions. (Fox Sports did not replay

footage of the Travers Day injury — the horse was euthanized behind tarps — and NYRA did not make a replay available online.)

But those moments are also, unfortunately, the reality of the sport, which means that NYRA is essentially presenting viewers with a sanitized and inaccurate view of racing. And yes, the same criticism can be leveled at news coverage of the industry.

That's understandable, I suppose. Racing injuries, horrific and sobering, are nothing anyone wants to witness, and rare is the industry or company that's eager to publicize its warts.

Let's not forget, though, that NYRA has been judged "a state actor" and is supported by significant taxpayer subsidies, including the \$455 million state loan being used to rebuild Belmont Park. Video of its races, I'd argue, should therefore be considered public property and part of the public record.

Editing out footage of a horse injury, then, is not unlike a mayor ordering the removal of embarrassing moments from recordings of a city council meeting. It turns the video into propaganda that hides the truth.

But McKenna said NYRA is simply displaying the sensitivity increasingly typical of sports broadcasts. He compared the editing to how ESPN and the NFL handled the in-game collapse of Buffalo player Damar Hamlin, with the network switching to studio broadcasters while the Bills safety was treated on the field.

Fair enough. But broadcasters did show the hit that lead to Hamlin's collapse again and again, as they so often do when athletes are injured.

Then, of course, the NFL suspended that game when it became clear how critical the situation was, and didn't replay the game. NYRA's races on Saturday and Sunday went ahead as scheduled, despite the two horse deaths.