

Testimony of Gary Stevens
Subcommittee on Health Field Hearing
“A Review of Efforts to Protect the Health of Jockeys and Horses in Horseracing”
April 30, 2012

Good morning.

I'd like to thank the Members of Congress for holding this hearing today. A hearing that I feel is invaluable to the survival of our sport.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Gary Stevens. I am a retired Hall of Fame jockey with over 5,000 worldwide wins in my 27 year career. I've won the Kentucky Derby 3 times, the Preakness twice, and the Belmont three times. Too bad they don't count Triple Crowns that way or I'd have a few of those too. I've won 8 Breeders Cups, the Dubai World Cup and a record 9 Santa Anita Derbys. I have ridden all over the world for the top trainers in England, France, Hong Kong and Japan. I have won an Eclipse Award and was one of the youngest ever inducted into the Hall of Fame at age 34. I was the President of the Jockeys Guild for multiple terms. I've also been a trainer, assistant trainer, exercise rider, as well as racing consultant and I now work for HRTV and NBC Sports as a racing analyst. I have seen every aspect of this industry since I was a kid, as my dad is a horse trainer. So I feel that I am more equipped than most to speak on this topic. I'm not speaking with statistics, or scientific information that most of us can't understand. I'm speaking from my personal 40 some years of experience in this industry.

It is my strong belief that the use of race day medications in the sport of horse racing has to be banned or our sport will not survive another decade. Unfortunately if changes are not made my grandchildren will not know this sport.

When I was asked to testify here today I wondered what kinds of repercussions I would get from our industry for being here. I've worked my whole life to maintain a good reputation in this industry, as someone who is hard working, dedicated and a true horseman. I know that by testifying here today some people will blacklist me. What a sad state of an industry that is, to know you may be blacklisted for trying to outlaw drugs during competition. But I knew when I was asked to be here that I needed to give this committee my opinion. I know I need to be here because other jockeys couldn't be here. My statement set forth is my opinion on what needs to be done to save not only the integrity of our sport, but the sport as a whole. There are no national set standards for anything in our sport. There needs to be a national governing body to regulate these things and create a national standard with rules and consequences that are enforced.

Jockeys and horses risk their lives every day for this industry. It is something that we chose to do and we know the risks. The horses don't know these risks. They love to run, and they were born to run, but it is our responsibility to take care of these horses. A lot of people in this industry have everything that they have because of these animals. It's time we give back and do what is right for the horses as well. It is very disconcerting for me that some of the major forces in our industry publicly say they are in support of this while they are supporting the use of race day medication. I don't know their motives or sources of information but I know that race day

medication is not going to help the long term survival of our sport. It also does not help the image.

Whether we like it or not, everything about racing is perception, and right now we are perceived as a bloodthirsty sport where people die and horses die and we don't care. We are perceived as drugging our horses to do everything from train, to run, to win. We are not a bloodthirsty sport, and we do care very much. But time is running out. I see the writing on the wall, and it's not very encouraging. Until we do what every other racing jurisdiction in the world has done, which is zero tolerance when it comes to medication, we are in real trouble.

Is our product so flawed that we have to use race day medications to maintain thoroughbreds as active racing assets? That's pathetic. In Europe horses can run up gallops that are uphill and they are stronger for it. Their product isn't more flawed because of non medication, it is thriving and their horses are producing stronger horses than have more endurance. We have 2 days of racing every year called the Breeders Cup. It is some of the richest racing in the world. Do you know what everyone outside of America calls it? The Bleeders Cup. It is a joke to all of them that every horse that is a bad bleeder and can't run elsewhere in the world comes here and is given Lasix and runs. Isn't that great. The US horse racing industry is looked at as a joke by the world wide horse racing industry.

I always hear it said that if we go without race day medications we will only be able to race 2 days a week. But with the number of horses available right now and the quality of horses available right now that's how many days we should be racing with quality, non medicated horses. It will take a few years to build up the number of quality horses but a few years is well worth the sacrifice to build back up to strong, quality horses that can run unmedicated.

If you take any other sport and say "we have to use drugs on game day" you would be the laughing stalk of this country. Baseball players are ruled off for life for drug positives. Not in racing. Not only are they not ruled off but they are encouraged. Are you kidding me? We encourage the use of race day medications. Does that sound right to anyone sitting in this room? Of course not. It sounds ludicrous. Which is exactly what we sound like to everyone outside of this sport. And that's just for legal race day meds. What about illegal ones? Well those offenders get a slap on the wrist and can appeal and appeal until it doesn't even matter anymore. And oh, by the way, they can keep racing while they appeal. Seriously, what has our sport come to?

Horses need down time. We are a year around sport, where horses are expected to perform and maintain a high standard year around. Horses need time off to heal naturally. As a jockey I would do whatever I had to do to show up, whether it was an injection or such. My career ended much earlier than it should have had I given myself the time to heal up every time I was hurt. I didn't know how badly I was hurting myself, and racehorses for damn sure don't know. I would still be riding today and a lot of good horses would still be running today, if medications weren't used in the way they are. Would you inject your son or daughter so they could run in a track meet? I don't think so. You would let them heal and miss a race or two until they could come back and not damage themselves more. So why would we do it to horses?

As it is for any living being, there is a time and a place for medicine . But I don't believe that place is on race day for horses that are not sound. There is nothing worse than a horse not being able to feel that it has an issue. As a jockey I would work a horse on say a Wednesday. If that horse had something wrong with it, not only would I feel it, but so would the horse. They would be hesitant and not want to hurt themselves. Come race day Saturday I would get on the same horse and they would feel like a million bucks. That was the scariest feeling ever. 9 times out of 10 those horses broke a leg off. I knew immediately they had been medicated and could not feel their own pain. There is nothing worse than being on a horse with a snapped off leg who continued to try and run for you. Its one of the worst feelings I have experienced. Could you imagine breaking your leg and still trying to run because you could not feel it?

I was lucky enough to play the role of George Wolff in Seabiscuit. Most recently I played Ronnie Jenkins in Luck. I had a scene where a horse breaks it leg and has to be put down. In the scene the apprentice jock says to me "She was running so good Ronnie, I wouldn't have asked her if she wasn't". I respond by saying "I know she was, I saw." "You never get use to it." Everyone said it was such great acting. The thing is, I wasn't acting. I've been there TOO many times and you don't get use to it, you NEVER get use to it.

Anyone who wants to continue the use of race days meds, I say put yourself or your child on top of a medicated thoroughbred going 40 miles an hour, with 5 or 6 other horses that may have also been medicated, knowing full well that if there is something wrong that horse won't feel it. If you feel comfortable doing THAT, then go ahead and allow the use of race day meds to continue.

Do I think a lot of vets, owners and trainers are going to want to continue to use race day meds. Of course they are, because they feel there jobs depend on it. I was a trainer, and I know that in the current state of our industry trainers feel they need those drugs to be competitive. But I also know I got tons of emails, texts and calls from jockeys, owners and trainers thanking me for coming here today. Thanking me for doing the right thing. Thanking me for standing up since they can not speak out publicly about this issue. Thanking me for trying to save this sport from the grave they are digging for themselves. One prominent owner sent me the result of his horses that he has been running without drugs for quite some time now. The results are astoundingly positive. They have higher win percentages, fewer breakdowns, and less injuries. Now if everyone else would just get on board this industry can get back to the respected place it once was.

Thank you for letting me testify today in front of this committee. I know that there are many issues out there and I thank you for taking the time to be here and have me here. My friend Ron Turcott who won the Triple Crown on Secretariat couldn't be with us today to testify. He can't travel well because he is in a wheel chair from a racing accident. I'm grateful that I am ABLE to stand in front of you today. I stand here for the people like Ron Turcott that can not. Please do something before it is too late.