

# THE LAST HURDLE – JUMPS RACING

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Jane Duckworth June 2010

Is the writing on the wall for the 177 year old Australian jumps racing industry? Animal welfare groups have been campaigning for around 30 years to abolish hurdle and steeplechase events in Australia as horses that fall during jumps racing events often suffer serious injuries or death.

## WHAT IS JUMPS RACING?

In jumps racing, thoroughbred horses generally run longer distances than they do in flat races, jumping a series of fences along the way. There are both hurdles (generally shorter with lower obstacles), and steeplechases (longer, run at lower speeds with higher obstacles).

There are many aspects to the sport that pose serious risk to horses. Jumping at speed in a group is the fundamental problem. It harms horses at a rate far above that of flat racing.

Both the industry and its opponents tend to define safety by looking at the proportion of race starters that fall or die. In a jumps race there is roughly a 1 in 10 chance of injury and a 1 in 150 chance of death for the racehorse.

In 1991, a Senate Select Committee address on animal welfare concluded they had serious concerns about the welfare of horses in jumps races, and recommended that state governments across the country phase out jumps racing over a three year period. Since then there have been six other reviews, the last of which was the 2008 Jones report.

NSW and Tasmania abandoned the sport in 1997 and 2008 respectively, but Victoria and South Australia still continue, despite the fact that the Racing Victoria Ltd board announced in November last year that 2010 would be the last jumps racing season in Victoria.

In January this year, in a last minute back flip, the RVL gave the industry another lifeline announcing that jumps racing would continue beyond 2010 if three Key Performance Indicators were met. These KPIs were negotiated with the jumps racing industry stakeholders and were made very clear.

1. A reduction in fall rate to 3% of starters
2. A reduction in fatality rate to 0.65% of starters
3. 80% of races must have at least 8 starters

Currently, the 2010 season is failing all 3. The death rate is more than double the allowable rate, and falls are one and a half times the allowable rate set by RVL in January. Interestingly, the third KPI can no longer be achieved.

Industry people have argued that the loss of jumps racing will negatively affect the Australian economy. The truth is, compared to flat racing; it is worth just 0.71% of the racing turnover (source RSPCA). They also take offence at claims of animal cruelty, they say the horses are well looked after and would be sent to the knackery if it weren't for jumps racing. Is that a good enough excuse for continuing a sport which after many reviews and so called safety implementations is becoming more dangerous?

Jumps racing seems to be approaching the last hurdle in Australia, but could it have been saved? Is the ban a win for animal rights, or the result of the racing industry failing to identify feasible ways to make the sport safer and therefore sustainable?

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## **JUMPS RACING OVERSEAS**

Jumps racing is still held in countries such as England, Ireland, Japan, the US and New Zealand. In the UK and Ireland, jumps racing (otherwise known as National Hunt) is a major sport and is not facing an impending ban, so let's have a look at their jumps racing scene.

It is difficult to gain an insight into how the sport is run there and the differences between it and Australia. What reasons could explain why it is a success in the UK and Ireland but on the decline here?

### **Breeding & Training**

In the UK and Ireland, horses are purpose bred and purpose trained for jumps racing, whereas in Australia horses in jumps races are generally the ones that can't cut it on the flat. Apparently no commercial Australian breeder would ever consider specifically breeding a jumps horse. In that case owners are having a last chance to recoup some of the cost.

In the UK and Ireland, hunting, team trials and amateur point to point races are hugely popular and the start of most horses and riders' careers. They give horses and riders the opportunity to learn to gallop and jump in a group and to be trained gradually before they upgrade to professional racing and a high pressure gambling environment. In Australia most horses start their careers as flat racers and would not have the same training and jumping experience as overseas horses.

### **Experience**

In the UK and Ireland, jumps racing continues all year round and there is a large base of very skilled jump riders with plenty of experience. The Australian season is from April to September, there are much fewer jumps races in Australia, so jockeys have less opportunity to get experience. Maybe our riders are less polished - not worse horsemen, just less experienced.

### **Tracks, obstacle size and design**

The tracks and obstacles are the biggest single issue for the sport, particularly in Australia. In Britain, much has changed in the past 30 years. Ground management, obstacle construction, the positioning of fences and hurdles, all have been the subject of intense study and action that has improved the safety levels dramatically. The obstacles in the UK have been kept big in size so riders respect them, and race speeds are slower. Apparently injury levels and fatalities have levelled off and are not rising.

In Australia, the quick pace of the races is a real safety issue. Racing authorities have responded to each internal and external review reducing the obstacles in height and number. Even after the latest changes and innovative jump designs, race speeds have increased, especially in hurdle races. Fatalities and injuries are greater than before.

### **Popularity and gambling**

The sport is very mainstream in the UK and Ireland and much more popular, with TV ratings and racecourse crowds sometimes exceeding those of flat racing. Part of the popularity lies in that some of the horses continue racing to 13 or 14 years of age unlike in flat racing, so the public get to know them.

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The way the industry is structured in Australia, there is a big emphasis on gambling. We have trifectas and first fours, which may encourage jockeys to continue pushing horses when they have little chance of winning. If they don't, stewards and punters feel they have not made every effort to gain the best possible finish. Whereas in the UK if jockeys feel like they cannot place as they enter the final straight, they are encouraged to pull the horse up, rather than push him to the point of exhaustion where he may fall.

## **Communication with outside bodies**

The jumps racing industry in the UK and Ireland have somewhat more open communication than here in Australia. They acknowledge that it is a risky sport so welcome the RSPCA to meetings and attend talks with animal welfare and rights groups. Possibly they have a constructive critical relationship. On the other hand, it seems that Racing Victoria does not want to be seen to be bending to the will of 'vocal minority groups' such as the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses and others. The RSPCA made a submission to the last jumps racing review (2009) but did not feel that its suggestions were implemented. While it is well known that most welfare organisations ultimately are looking for a permanent ban, other independent submissions specifically intended to 'save' jumps racing were also ignored.

## **WHAT ABOUT OTHER HORSE SPORTS?**

Welfare of horses in sport is being closely scrutinised worldwide and not just at the racetrack. Public concern over the way we use horses, and the impact it has on the image, popularity and subsequent income of the industry is growing and affecting all disciplines, from Pony Club to the Olympics.

There is a more sustainable way to train and use horses. Maybe the time has come for the horse industry and its governing bodies to embrace criticism and invite outside scrutiny. Closing ranks, stubbornly relying on tradition and deflecting media attention is not working, and now would be a good time to start taking advantage of our own potential to think outside the square and strive to come up with better, more ethical, and sustainable ways to ensure other horse sports continue and thrive in the future.