

Racehorse management practices in Sri Lanka

J.M.R.V. Wijayarathna*, I.S Abeygunawardena *

* Department of Basic Veterinary Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine & Animal Science,
University of Peradeniya

Abstract- The management of racehorses remains amateurish in Sri Lanka although the sport has been prevailing in the country for over a century. This study aimed to gain basic knowledge on the local management practices, identify related problems and make suggestions for improvement. Nuwara Eliya district was selected as the study area since rearing horses and racing is done mainly in this area. Data were obtained by administering a questionnaire to the stable workers and the horse owners of every stable unit (n=5) in the district. The total number of racehorses in the district was 44, out of which Thoroughbreds were predominant (62%). The majority of the horses (72%) are imported from India. All the stables were located on well drained land, and were not undesirably close to domestic dwellings. The basic construction design and material were similar in all stables. The daily routine in all stables was the same with only minor differences. The amount of exercise and the type and amount of feed given to the horses during the non racing period differ from those given during the racing season. The animals are fed depending on the physical needs, not by analyzing feed quality or evaluating the nutrient requirement. Grooming and hoof care comply with recommended methods although health care is not satisfactory since veterinary attention is sought only after the condition of a sick horse worsens. After the horse's racing days are over it is used for breeding or riding. Constraints faced by racehorse owners include high expense in maintaining horses and lack of workers with professional knowledge and expertise. The management of race horses in the Sri Lanka has not reached the standards of countries where horse racing is well developed. Relevant practices could be adopted from countries with a developed equestrian industry. This will upgrade the performance and welfare of race horses, thus improving the racing industry.

Index Terms- Racehorses, racing, management, Sri Lanka, stables.

I. INTRODUCTION

Horse racing, an equestrian sport with a long history, is popular in many countries. In Sri Lanka, however, horse racing and management has a great deal to improve to reach international standards. Management of race horses encompasses aspects such as housing, nutrition, training, exercise, grooming and general health care. According to literature, stables with loose boxes are preferred over tie stalls to house horses (Spaulding, 1976). Training and exercise are the most important aspects in the management of race horses. The age that horses are first ridden, or "broken" varies with the breed (Davison, 1987). A horse requires a balance of many nutrients (Cunha, 1980).

Different feed types are available for horses and the type given is determined based on factors such as cost, availability, quality,

requirement, and the nutritive value of the feed (Pilliner, 1999). Under the rules of racing and International Equestrian Federation (EFI), detection of any stimulant, sedative or 'substance other than a normal nutrient' in the body fluids of a horse will lead to disqualification (Pilliner, 1999). Grooming, which is performed twice daily is important for aesthetic reasons and for health (Wright, 1987 and McBane, 2005). Good hoof and dental care are also essential to maintain health and performance (Spaulding, 1976 and Pilliner, 1999). Although horse racing has been prevailing in the country since the colonial era, no documented studies are available on the management practices of local race horses. This study was carried out to gain preliminary knowledge on the topic, identify related problems and to make suggestions for improvement.

II. METHODOLOGY

An extensive literature review was carried out to gain knowledge on the management of race horses in countries with a well developed equestrian industry. Since horse racing is an activity done mainly in Nuwara Eliya, most of the stables for race horses were confined to this area until recent times. Since it could be stated that the management practices of horses in Nuwara Eliya reflect the management of horses throughout the country, the Nuwara Eliya district was selected as the study area. Each stable unit in the district was visited from July 2010 to August 2011, and a structured questionnaire was administered to the stable workers and in some cases, the race horse owners, to collect data on the management practices.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sole purpose of rearing horses in the stables in the Nuwara Eliya district is for racing, except for in one, where breeding is the major purpose. Thoroughbreds are the predominant breed used for racing (62%). The total number of racehorses in the district was 44. Most stables maintain a higher number of geldings compared to the number of mares and stallions.

The origin of the race horses in these stables is mainly India, although few locally bred animals are also used for racing. Imported horses have a 'passport' issued by the Indian Stud Book Authority with the details regarding the animal's pedigree and markings. However, no proper records are maintained on individual animals.

All the stables were located on well drained land, and were not undesirably close to domestic dwellings. The basic construction design and material were similar in all stables. The dimensions of

a box comply with the standards (Sainsbury, 1987). The daily routine in all stables was the same with only minor differences. Typically, the horses are taken out for training or exercise in the morning, which lasts for four hours. Subsequently, the horses are brought in, groomed and fed. These activities are repeated in the evening. Grooming and hoof care comply with the methods recommended by McBane (2005) and Wright (1987). The imported horses are well experienced athletes. However, when a foal is born, it is trained for racing by Sri Lankan trainers. Foals get accustomed to be handled by humans by the age of six months. Specific training for racing begins at two years of age. A thoroughbred horse takes three to four years to reach the highest level of grading which is 'Class 1'. The training procedure adopted by Sri Lankan horse trainers obey the methods recommended by Davison (1987). The exercise regime during the racing season differs from that during non-racing periods. Similarly, the quantity and composition of the diet during the racing season is different compared to that during non racing periods. Water is provided ad-libitum at all times. None of the stables practiced a method of analyzing feed quality or evaluating the nutrient requirement of the horses. The animals are fed depending on the physical needs as observed by the workers. Thus, it is evident that the nutritional management of race horses in Sri Lanka needs to be developed considerably. The nutritional requirement should be evaluated scientifically and feed formulation should be done accordingly, to upgrade performance. Although it is not practiced in Sri Lanka, the nutritional status can be assessed by observing a horse's body condition. This is useful in ration formulation. Condition can be assessed using a method originally devised for farm livestock, known as condition scoring, by which the horse's weight displacement along the neck, ribs and over the back and quarters is assessed visually (Pilliner, 1999).

The commonly reported ailments were colic (20%) and lacerations (45%). The stable workers attempt to treat mild to moderate conditions and veterinary attention is sought only after the condition worsens. Each stable has a small store of commonly used drugs, which are used by the workers to treat animals with various conditions, mostly without any justification. The horses are vaccinated annually against tetanus and dewormed every 6 months. Dental examination is done if animals show signs of dental disorders. Regular hoof care is practiced in all stables. Few animals (2%) show signs of boredom and stress such as stall walking and pawing. Vices such as kicking and biting are exhibited by a few (5%). Although veterinary care is quite disregarded by horse owners due to the high cost, health and welfare of the horses could be improved greatly with regular veterinary attention.

The racing lifespan of a horse ends when it is no longer fit enough to run or reaches its twelfth year, after which it is used for breeding or riding. Animals with a good pedigree and performance are selected for breeding. Once a mare is bred, pregnancy is confirmed by failure to return to estrus, or in some cases, by rectal examination, carried out by a veterinarian. However, the knowledge and expertise in the field of horse breeding has to be improved vastly if it is to reach international standards.

Constraints faced by race horse owners

The expense of maintaining a race horse is high, and is about Rs.20,000 per month in the non racing period, flaring up to Rs.50,000 per month during the racing season. None of the workers have professional qualifications although a few (8%) have been working with race horses in countries where horse racing is well developed. All imported horses are on the verge of retirement from their racing careers, and thus perform poorly or sustain illness after a short period. No proper screening methods are employed to detect drug abuse, although in developed countries, drug screening is a pre requisite for a horse to be qualified for a race (Pilliner, 1999). The prizes awarded for the winners at a racing event are not as attractive compared to those awarded for other sports.

IV. CONCLUSION

The management of local race horses has not reached the standards of countries where horse racing is an advanced industry due to various constraints. Management practices in countries where equestrianism is developed can be studied and certain practices could be adopted as relevant. If the management can be improved, the performance and welfare of the horses will develop so that horse racing in Sri Lanka would reach higher standards. In turn, it will improve the racing industry.

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AUTHORS

First Author – J.M.R.V. Wijayarathna, BVSc, Department of Basic Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya. rukmalijaya@gmail.com

Second Author – I.S Abeygunawardena, BVSc, MSc, Department of Basic Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya. ind_ab2002@yahoo.com

Correspondence Author – J.M.R.V. Wijayarathna,
rukmaliwijaya@gmail.com, ruk.wijayarathna@gmail.com ,

+94784758835.