

June 17, 2019

VIA FIRST-CLASS MAIL AND E-MAIL

Kevin J. Schneider, Sheriff  
 Polk County Sheriff's Office  
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Chief Greg Stallman  
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Dear Sheriff Schneider and Chief Stallman:

I hope this finds you well. I am writing on behalf of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and its more than 34,000 members and supporters in Iowa to respectfully request that you investigate a recent act of apparent livestock abuse and neglect by Ramon Vazquez at Prairie Meadows, a racetrack in Altoona, and pursue all appropriate charges.

On May 18, jockey Ramon Vazquez rode Special Trip, a Thoroughbred filly with an 0-12 record. During the race, he whipped her to the point of leaving an open welt on her right flank.<sup>1</sup> Racing stewards fined Vazquez just \$500 for “excessive/indiscriminate whipping,”<sup>2</sup> even though this is far from the first time Vazquez’s beating of a horse has drawn an administrative fine. Racetrack stewards noted that Vazquez ““has had multiple penalties in recent history for excessive or indiscriminate whipping of his horse during a race.””<sup>3</sup> On August 3, 2018, stewards fined him \$1,000 for whipping mare Underpressure 48 times in the final 3½ furlongs of a race.<sup>4</sup> Despite Vazquez’s known history of severely whipping horses, the administrative penalties have obviously failed to deter him, and more robust enforcement of state law may be required for meaningful penalization of Vazquez’s conduct and to prevent other horses from being injured under his hand.

Research makes plain that whipping horses causes pain and distress—particularly when done in a manner that leaves a horse with an open welt on her flank, which is the area on a horse’s side between her ribs and hip.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T.D. Thornton, ‘Open Welt’ Stick Work Earns Vazquez Another Whip Fine, *Thoroughbred Daily News*, May 22, 2019, <http://www.thoroughbreddailynews.com/open-welt-stick-work-earns-vazquez-another-whip-fine/> (last visited June 17, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *Flank*, Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/flank> (last visited June 17, 2019).

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- PETA Germany
- PETA Netherlands
- PETA Foundation (U.K.)

Australian veterinarian, riding instructor and horse behaviorist Paul McGreevy, in an effort to examine whether whipping a horse causes pain, had his own leg whipped as hard as a jockey might whip a horse.<sup>6</sup> He wrote that the act did cause him pain and distress and made available thermographic images showing inflammation in his upper leg thirty minutes after his leg was struck just once.<sup>7</sup> Further, Dr. Lydia Tong, a forensic veterinary pathologist, “compar[ed] flank skin from a horse and the equivalent skin on a human, examining skin structure and location and amount of nerve tissue.”<sup>8</sup> She found that “[t]he epidermis (outermost layer) of horse skin was actually thinner than human epidermis, meaning that horses have fewer skin cells between the environment and sensitive nerve endings,” and her research “indicates that horses don’t have the ‘padding’ from pain that is assumed with other large animals” and “that a horse’s skin may feel even more sensation than human skin.”<sup>9</sup> Many countries and racing jurisdictions prohibit whipping a horse on the flank “because there is little muscle in this area to absorb the impact of the whip. The flank . . . is extremely sensitive and vulnerable to injury.”<sup>10</sup> Veterinarian Dr. Ingrid Taylor, Research Associate with PETA, reviewed the video footage of Vazquez’s races on Special Trip and Underpressure. She stated:

Repeated strikes [to Special Trip’s flank] would cause pain, bruising, swelling, and possible bleeding and laceration, and it is likely that excessive and repetitive blows exacerbated the depth and severity of the wound. This would cause both acute pain at the moment of injury, and ongoing pain as the injury healed.

Regarding Underpressure, she stated:

Vazquez struck Underpressure repeatedly on the flank, an area of high sensitivity. Striking this area activates mechanoreceptors in the skin and has been shown to create a visible indentation in the skin 83%<sup>11</sup> of the time in racehorses. Given that a horse’s pain-sensing nerves are close to the epidermis, or top layer of skin, it is highly likely that whip strikes cause pain, and repeated whip strikes in the same area would cause tissue damage, abrasions, swelling, bruising, bleeding, and possible laceration. The injuries, when inflicted in the area of the flank, may also cause injury to the stifle of the horse, resulting in pain, swelling, bruising, lacerations, and decreased mobility. The pain from these injuries would last well beyond the cessation of the race, compromising the horse’s welfare and wellbeing. Additionally, excessive and painful whipping likely causes psychological damage and distress to horses, particularly in the final stretches of a race where the horse is nearing exhaustion. In these cases, whipping becomes a punitive measure and may cause frustration, anxiety, and even fear in the horse, because he may be physically unable to meet the demands of the jockey and is being punished for trying.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul McGreevy, *Whips Hurt Horses—If My Leg’s Anything to Go By*, The Conversation, Oct. 28, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/whips-hurt-horses-if-my-legs-anything-to-go-by-33470> (last visited June 17, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Horses More Sensitive to Pain than Previously Thought*, Paulick Report, Apr. 6, 2015, <https://www.paulickreport.com/horse-care-category/horses-more-sensitive-to-pain-than-previously-thought/> (last visited June 17, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Study: Whip Use by Jockeys, RSPCA, <https://www.rspca.org.au/campaigns/whips-racing/study-whip-use-jockeys> (last visited June 17, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See McGreevy, *supra* note 6.

As you know, a person commits livestock<sup>12</sup> neglect when he “injures . . . livestock by any means which causes pain or suffering in a manner inconsistent with customary animal husbandry practices.”<sup>13</sup> Vazquez beat Special Trip hard enough to leave an open wound. Even if whipping a horse in an attempt to gain a competitive advantage is considered a husbandry practice, the fact that Vazquez was fined by racing stewards for a whip violation shows that his conduct was not consistent with customary practices. Further, Vazquez also appears to have committed livestock abuse by “intentionally injur[ing] . . . livestock owned by another person,”<sup>14</sup> as evinced by the fact that he whipped Special Trip with enough force to leave an open wound and the fact that Vazquez is an experienced jockey<sup>15</sup> who would know the likely results of his action and who had plenty of prior notice that his severe whipping of horses is contrary to racing rules.

While PETA agrees with Prairie Meadows stewards that Vazquez’s conduct was unlawful under racing regulations, PETA implores you not to let the meager penalty that body imposed take the place of meaningful prosecution under Iowa’s livestock abuse and neglect laws, which exist for the protection of livestock within the state and to penalize offenses against them. PETA urges your agency to investigate Vazquez’s actions with respect to both Special Trip and Underpressure and to pursue all appropriate charges.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions at [REDACTED]. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Elisabeth Custalow  
Counsel and Manager of Regulatory Affairs

cc: John P. Sarcone  
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<sup>12</sup> “‘Livestock’ means an animal belonging to the . . . equine . . . species.” Iowa Code Ann. § 717.1(4).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* § 717.2(1)(c).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* § 717.1A. Vazquez was not the owner of the horse. *See* Special Trip, Horse Profile (Thoroughbred), Equibase, <http://www.equibase.com/profiles/Results.cfm?type=Horse&refno=9896809&registry=T&rft=TB> (attached).

<sup>15</sup> Vazquez has been a jockey since at least 2002. *See* Ramon A. Vazquez, Jockey Profile (Thoroughbred), Equibase, <http://www.equibase.com/profiles/Results.cfm?type=People&searchType=J&eID=100175&rft=TB> (attached).