

THE ONE-WORD SOLUTION: TWO-YEAR-OLDS IN **RACE** TRAINING



Proposal by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) for auction companies to implement a simple but crucial reform for under tack shows.

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Summary

THE ONE-WORD SOLUTION: TWO-YEAR-OLDS IN **RACE** TRAINING

PETA's proposal may not be what you are expecting. We are not seeking to abolish under tack shows, or slow them down, or convert them to untimed gallops only. And the reform we are recommending is not just a "compromise." It's a solution.

It keeps the clock but schedules the under tack shows for the appropriate fall season that corresponds to the juveniles' stage of physical development. Adding the word "race" would make all the difference: "Two-year-olds in ***race*** training" would indicate that they are actually training for the upcoming races to start their careers—not the reckless, premature training to prepare the horses expressly for the purpose of performing speed stunts at spring under tack shows. These fall under tack shows would be run at the correct four-furlong and five-furlong lengths that are the preferred distances for actual morning timed works—not the breakneck speeds of one-furlong and ¼ mile sprints that they will never run again in their racing careers. This would be exponentially safer and the best way to properly evaluate the horses. It would be a win for all stakeholders, without compromise.

Please note that we recommend these fall "two-year olds in race training" auctions be offered initially as trial bonus options beginning in 2024, not as replacements to the spring auctions currently on the calendar. We hope these will serve as successful models and that a permanent transition to the fall season will be considered in subsequent years.

What we are suggesting is not revolutionary. Auction companies already recognize the issue and have addressed it with modified rules at lower-profile events. For the January 2023 Ocala Breeders' Sales Winter Mixed Sale, [OBS stipulated](#), "Horses three years old or older may gallop or breeze at least 3/8 of a mile for an official time. Two-year-olds may gallop but will not be timed."

The same logic and common sense need to be extended, and this solution would resolve the welfare issues while appeasing the spectrum of stakeholders.

The Current Juvenile Auction Season and Under Tack Show Format Is Dangerous and Damaging

It doesn't take a Rhodes Scholar to know that revving a juvenile—some as young as 22 months—to sprint a furlong in under 10 seconds is a catastrophically bad idea. Dennis Brida, former Executive Director of the New York Thoroughbred Breeders, said it best, calling these breeze-up shows “**idiotic speed tests**” that are “**butchering**” horses. Mike Repole, owner of Repole Stables, said, “We will also ban the stupidity of a 1 furlong 9.3 breeze. I would suggest they work go 3f or just gallop only before the auction.”

The carnage comes not just from the sprints at under tack shows themselves but is evident in the attrition rate of juveniles from the demanding and damaging training just to get them to auction. This results in detrimental long-time consequences, and routinely more than 25% of those horses originally catalogued do not even make it to auction, being scratched as “outs.”

Scott Blasi, assistant trainer to Steve Asmussen, was recorded during PETA's undercover investigation saying,

“You could not believe how many [horses] they hurt and kill before they ever even get to the racetrack... It's mind-boggling.”

The gruesome breakdowns at under tack shows have been captured in horrific detail in multiple PETA undercover videos.

Most equine veterinary experts—even those who advocate for controlled speed work in the training of juveniles to strengthen bones—condemn these self-destructive showcases. These bullet works involve faster fractions than these physically immature horses will ever run again in their future racing careers.

Mark Roberts, partner at Hidden Brook and former general manager of Florida's Adena Springs division, [said in 2007](#), “**We feel that it does not serve the 2- year-olds or the buyers to have an immature horse race a furlong in 10 and change.**”

Horse trainer John Kimmel, who holds a veterinary degree, [shared this view](#):

“It would serve everybody well if we slowed everything down and sold sounder horses. There is no need to whip and drive them as fast as they can possibly go. It's counterproductive to the horse physically and mentally.”

Many in the industry go further, arguing for eliminating the clock altogether or limiting it to gallop only:

Consignor Becky Thomas of Sequel Bloodstock [said](#), **“I think I speak for every consignor that we’d like to do away with the clock at the breeze shows and go to an open gallop for everything. That would be better for the horses, as well as the buyers and sellers.”**

Jockey Chantal Sutherland tweeted in 2022, **“I love our sport but this part of it I have trouble with... we should have gallop shows NOT breeze/work shows. #tooFast #tooyoung this is for people that can’t see speed without seeing it.”**

Patti Miller, vice president of the race horse consulting company EQB, [added](#),

“Overemphasis on the stop watch is oversimplification. It may be destroying the welfare of the horses showcased, hurting the livelihoods of the consignors, and ultimately, putting our venue at great risk from PETA type animal rights groups.”

Under Tack Show Times Under the Current System Are Not Predictive of Future Success

Even Boyd Browning, President and CEO of Fasig-Tipton, [acknowledged](#) in 2019 that there’s too much emphasis on the clock, especially at the one-furlong distance: **“I personally think times are overemphasized at under-tack shows... the last time I looked, we didn’t run any races at an eighth of a mile... I don’t think [a fast time] means anything dramatic.”**

Joe Clancy, editor of Mid-Atlantic Thoroughbred, [asked](#), **“No Thoroughbred will run a 10-second furlong in a race, everyone agrees on that tenet. Then why do they do it at the sales?”** He then stated, **“I feel pretty certain that an eighth-of-a-mile breeze is not a proven predictor of long-term success.”**

And Consignor Niall Brennan, in the *Thoroughbred Daily News*, [agreed](#):

“To make them go as fast as they can possibly go on their heads, for a furlong, has got nothing to do with what they’re going to be like as racehorses.”

Dr. Sheila Lyons, who has been featured on the cover of The Blood-Horse magazine, writes: **“Pushing these immature 2-year-old horses for speed before they have reached physical and mental maturity is recklessly dangerous and systematically damaging for the animal while also proving to be unreliable for the prospective buyers as a predictor of future racing ability.”**

The problem is that the horses are being trained only to run an extreme sprint just to impress prospective buyers, or as Kirkwood Stables owner Kip Elser [recounted](#): **“... a 2 year-old sale entry was prepared for the breeze show, not for the racetrack.”**

Training just for the under tack show is also counterproductive and detrimental to the horse's long-term racing career—so damaging in fact that [Mark Roberts said](#) a jockey would get fired for pushing a horse that hard in actual race training: **“What we ask them to do, they’ll never do another day in their life... If a jock worked his horse like that in the morning—in :21 flat for a quarter or :10 flat for an eighth—they’d fire the jock.”**

And Bloodstock agent Rollin Baugh [referred to these horses](#) as “survivors:” **“They’ll never go ten flat again in their lives and if they do they won’t win the race... You are buying a survivor. A survivor is good on the one hand that it survived, but what things have already been done to the horse that you’d prefer not to have done?”**

The top sales at auctions—often inflated by blazing under tack show times—rarely return the price in future purse earnings. The “survivors” may not even survive as the intense premature training and the 10-second bullet breezes often damage them and make them more vulnerable to career-ending and catastrophic injuries. Three-year-old “graduates” of under tack shows Maple Leaf Mel and Havnameltdown were some of the high-profile fatalities this year. And the highest price fetched at the 2021 Tattersalls Craven Breeze-up Sale (by a horse who ran an “unofficial” bullet work) was Tout Ensemble, who broke down in August 2023 and was euthanized on the track. He had quickly fallen down the claiming ranks and ended up at the lowest levels of Mountaineer.

But Fast Times Inflate Auction Prices

Although stakeholders recognize and agree that these are legitimate and serious issues, they resist eliminating the timed sprints because the clock generates buzz and inflates prices and commissions. “Gallop-only” wouldn’t be as sexy as a bullet 9 ⁴/₅ seconds. Consignors concede that they are training just for the sales, in which a frenzied fraction of a second in a furlong translates to hundreds of thousands of dollars, at the expense of common sense, safety and good horsemanship.

Mark Roberts [voiced his exasperation](#) with this situation:

“It’s not like consignors wake up every day and say, ‘I want to make this horse go as fast as he can today’... Consignors get heat for doing it, trust me they don’t want to. But if they don’t do it, agents and owners won’t buy the horse.”

Consignor Cary Frommer [echoed this](#): **“It’s a genie we can’t put back in the bottle because it’s buyer-driven... You can blame the consignors, but it’s 100 percent buyer-driven. Even the people who say the times are crazy line up on the fast times.”**

Stakeholders understand these reckless time trials can be self-destructive but believe this risk is best for the immediate bottom line. There doesn’t seem to be a way to reconcile the physical reality with the market reality. **“If there’s a way out of this room...”** [wrote Joe Clancy](#) in Mid-Atlantic Thoroughbred, **“... nobody can really find the door just yet.”**

However, There Is a Solution!

The real problem, surprisingly, is *not* the clock!

The insertion of this one word—“*race* training”—would be a simple but critical paradigm shift. Under tack shows, as we detailed, would be offered later in the juvenile season when the horses are more physically developed and on their natural training timetable. The more sensible format of 4-furlong and 5-furlong works would correspond to real race training. They would be actual training breezes. As such, the buyers would not just be engaged in speculation and projections based on one-furlong dragster sprints.

And since all the horses would be running in uniform 4-furlong and 5-furlong distances, they could still be fairly measured against each other. When Santa Anita modified its whip policy for the June 2019 Fasig-Tipton under tack show, [Adrian Gonzalez](#) of Checkmate Thoroughbreds said: **“But at least it’s fair. It’s not like one consignor can use it and another can’t. If none of us use it, that’s fine because it’s even for all of us.”**

And by observing these prospects in the proper context of actual works, buyers would be able to utilize multiple metrics and horsemanship tools beyond just the clock. Andrew Havens of Havens Bloodstock Agency [similarly was optimistic](#) about how changes at that Santa Anita Fasig-Tipton under tack show could signal a new era in evaluating juveniles. **“To be honest, I’ve always wished these people looked at the horses more than they did the clock anyway, so maybe this’ll be the beginning of that kind of program... I’d be in favor of that.”**

A Win for ALL Stakeholders!

A Win for the Consignors

Fall auctions would present consignors with second chances for horses who were not sold or did not meet the reserve at earlier auctions or did not meet the time/performance expectations at the spring auctions; and for horses who were injured, “out,” or not ready for (or those not aimed at) earlier auctions. These also would be ideal targets for late-developing horses or horses foaled in the late spring.

Patti Miller of EQB [emphasized](#): “That exponential increase in the forces experienced by these young 2-year-olds may be what is creating ‘outs’ and RNAs via X-ray issues for so many of the consignors, since horses risk injury, and can be injured during the breeze show. If consignors can’t sell their horses because agents cannot get veterinary approval, no one is happy. The consignor can’t sell the horse, the customers can’t buy the horse, and the veterinarians, while being the ONLY ones making money out of this process, get blamed for being honest.”

Consignors or “pinhookers” need their juveniles to be healthy to showcase the horses’ full potential. As such, responsible consignors would target these fall auctions, which would allow them to train on a more patient and flexible schedule determined by the horse’s development—

not dictated by a fixed, arbitrary spring sales date that forces them to engage in premature and damaging speed training. And as we described above, these fall sales would present “bonus” late-season opportunities for consignors and also could generate higher prices in some cases, as these horses would be more physically and mentally mature, sound, and would be demonstrating their actual talents and potential in real training for imminent races. The clock would still be used to help generate high prices, but used in a much more reasonable context along with an array of other metrics.

A Win for the Buyers

The early September two-year-olds in *race* training sales would:

- Allow buyers to make better evaluations based on standard 4-furlong and 5-furlong works in actual training breezes for races
- Enable buyers to bid with more confidence that the horse is sound and healthy

These sales would not just be speculative crapshoots.

A Win for the Auction Companies

These trial, model fall auctions would add to the roster of juvenile sales. These would serve as a “bonus” opportunity to showcase the two-year-olds (see the benefits to consignors above), not initially as a replacement for the spring sales.

A Win for the Horses

The current spring under tack show schedule imposes an artificially accelerated training timetable on the fragile juveniles, analogous to having middle-school students subjected to the rigors of an NFL combine. This results in an egregious attrition rate. A fall under tack show would allow real horsemanship in training, with individualized programs cautiously determined by the physical progress and setbacks of the horse. This is the only way to safely and humanely train, rather than arbitrarily predetermining that the horses will enter a spring sale.

A Win for the Racing Industry

The spring under tack shows in their current format are what jockeys call “suicide shows” because of the rate of unpredictable behavior and serious injuries to horses and subsequently to the jockeys. The industry is destroying its own product—literally—and risking its social license to operate. Racing already faces a critical decline in public perception, and the inhumane treatment of horses is the top issue always cited in polls. The sugar-high of a 9.4 furlong or a million-dollar juvenile sale is unsustainable and not in the interest of the individual horses, the breed, or the sport.

There does not need to be a conflict between animal welfare and market forces. The fall “two-year-olds in *race* training” under tack show would be a simple and reasonable bonus option that would appeal to and appease multiple interests. Ideally, all the current spring juvenile auctions

would transition to the fall model, including the proposed four- and five-furlong format. We believe this would be a viable, profitable, and more humane system that would set the standard and generate positive reviews to help repair the damage to the public image of the horse racing industry.