

# Ignorance Is Bliss?

by JW EQUINE

This column usually covers horses that have found a second career either as an alternative to racing or after a successful stint at the track. These are normally feel-good stories, showing someone's care for the horse's well-being.

With that in mind, I'd like to tell you about three books that struck me as addressing the horse's well-being—both short-term and long-term. These are *Traits of a Winner—The Formula for Developing Thoroughbred Racehorses* (by Carl Nafzger and reviewed later in this issue), *The Estes Formula for Breeding Stakes Winners* (compiled by Russell Meerdink from the writings and speeches of Joseph A. Estes), and *Run, Baby, Run* (by Bill Heller and subtitled "What Every Owner, Breeder and Handicapper Should Know About Lasix in Racehorses").

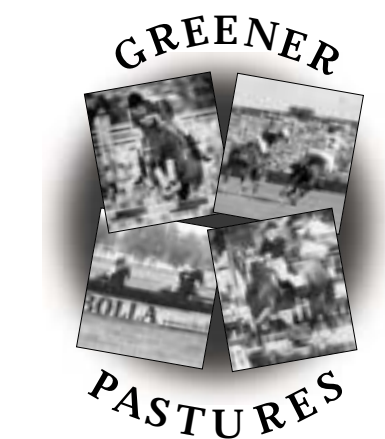
## The Estes Formula for Breeding Stakes Winners

Estes was responsible for devising the Average Earnings Index (AEI). He was an editor for *The Blood-Horse* and *Thoroughbred Record*, plus he was the breeding advisor to Nelson Bunker Hunt. Therefore he is, in essence, a highly respected man with insight. As he sees it, "There are four substantial barriers to the improvement of the Thoroughbred breed in the United States:

- (1) The extreme prevalence of claiming racing;
- (2) the lack of distance racing;
- (3) the lack of adequate racing for fillies; and
- (4) the blind refusal of breeders as a group to rid themselves of their least successful stock."

There's nothing outstanding about that quote except that it was published on June 21, 1941! It seems the industry adopted Mr. Estes' wisdom regarding AEI but discarded all else, once again proving that the ability to ignore is not new to the Thoroughbred industry.

In July of 1961 he wrote, "The fault



lies in the sophistry (a deliberately invalid argument displaying ingenuity in reasoning in the hope of deceiving

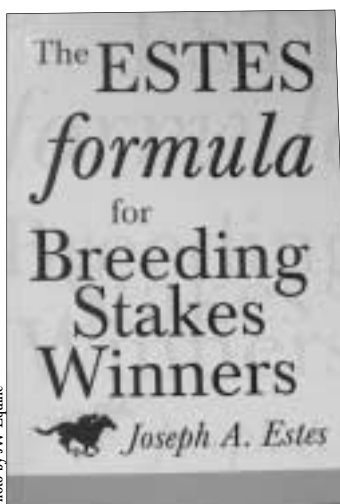


Photo by JW Equine

someone) that all drugs must be considered stimulants or depressants... Would it not be better if the commissioners relieved themselves of the obligation to maintain a doctrine which they cannot square with reality?" Apparently not.

In December of 1961, he published another gem. "The scientific basis for banning Phenylbutazone (Bute) is that it might stimulate a horse? In massive doses it can kill a horse—that makes it a stimulant? (asked Alice of the Old Racing Commissioner.) Not necessarily. But certainly it's a pain reliever. You have to admit that a dead horse feels no pain."

## Run, Baby, Run

Heller is an Eclipse Award-winning author who says, "I didn't start out to write a scathing book on Lasix—I started out to write an objective book on Lasix." He did his research, examining the results of studies, obtaining quotes, gathering all the numbers, and uncovering several interesting tidbits. For instance, did you know that in 1964 Northern Dancer was one of the first horses to receive Lasix?

The history of Lasix (now called Salix) is presented from its first uses on the racetrack through the arguments on both sides, testimony before Congress, approval by various racing commissions, regulatory variations from state to state, and the staggering percentages of horses on the medication, to his final chapter "Truth or Consequences."

Studies and their results are examined, along with the inclusion of quotes on their meaning, while racing commission discussions—for the adoption and rejection of medication use—are also shared. A particularly comprehensive one by the South African Jockey Club resulted in an article in the *Racing Review* and is quoted by Heller. "The horse has no say in the treatment/medication administered to him. The horse's participation in the race could aggravate the condition for which it was given medication. The horse will, because of the medication, be at an advantage or disadvantage compared to the other horses in his race. Medicating a horse has the potential for abuse of the horse, giving unfair advantage to his connections and providing an unfair disadvantage for punters (bettors).

"Regrettably, racing does not enjoy a good image as a sport. This makes it difficult for racing to compete with other sports for sponsorships and other forms of gaming for customers. If racing is seen to allow horses to be given medication to enable them to partici-

pate in a race, this will inevitably harm racing's image. It is likely to be characterized both as a cruel sport and as a sport and/or form of gaming where results can be changed through the use of medication.

"All of the world's leading racing jurisdictions, outside the Americas, believe, and recently confirmed, that the presence of medication in racehorses during races is undesirable and must be prohibited. There is, to date, no new or compelling evidence which suggests that the countries which have adopted this philosophy are wrong, or that they need to again review their collective viewpoint."

Under "The Implications of Permitting Medication in Racing," the article quotes Andy Beyer's column in the *Washington Post*. "Naïve outsiders might expect that the racing industry would try to rid itself of Clenbuterol. But the industry traditionally moves in the opposite direction—it stops cheating by legalizing a banned substance. It did that with both Butazolidin and Lasix. . .It is easy to react cynically

whenever a veterinarian, trainer or spokesman for a horsemen's organization utters the word 'therapeutic'—particularly after the campaigns to get Bute and Lasix legalized in the 1970s.

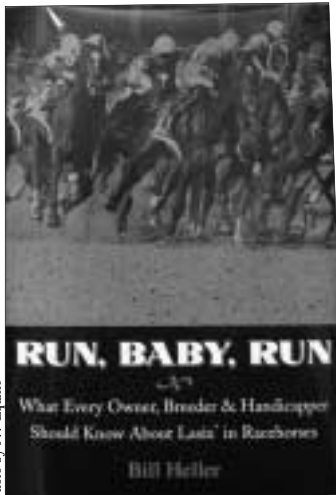


Photo by JW Equine

The first trainers to use Lasix illegally were able to bring about stunning form reversals. . .Eventually, most trainers were clamoring to use the wondrous drug. So horsemen and veterinarians went before state racing commissions and assured them that Lasix was a ther-

apeutic medication that doesn't affect horses' form. Of course, everybody who had witnessed those 10- and 20-length form reversals knew this was poppycock but, even today, horsemen and vets maintain this fiction.

"Every other major racing nation forbids the presence of the drugs in a horse's system on race day, and the sport manages to survive well enough without them. . .But since America abandoned the traditional standard of 'hay, oats and water,' the quality of this country's Thoroughbreds has steadily declined." Strong stuff.

After finishing the book, Heller feels that, "Racing has been in denial regarding all the research. There's been a reluctance to deal with it. I hope enough people make enough noise and say 'What are we doing?' One possible starting point is with 2-year-olds." Ah, but there's the rub—a starting point emerging from denial.

Read these books, and see if you don't agree that it appears as if it is people who are equipped with blinkers far more frequently than the horses.