



The Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance seeks quality standards in the care of former racehorses

## Second Acts

# Standard Bearers

WHEN STAKES ARE THIS HIGH, BET ON ACCREDITED AFTERCARE

By ALEXANDRA KOKKA



Accreditation is the cornerstone of TAA's operation. Aftercare facilities seeking accreditation are evaluated and inspected



**T**HE COURSE of a Thoroughbred's life after racing can take a wrong turn if left in the wrong hands. The stakes are too high to leave the fate of any Thoroughbred up to chance. With proper planning and thoughtful consideration, transitioning a horse from racing doesn't have to be a foreboding next step.

Funded initially by seed money from Breeders' Cup Ltd., The Jockey Club, and Keeneland Association Inc., the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance was built by the racing industry for the racing industry. Yet, there is still considerable confusion among industry participants about what distinguishes the TAA from every other Thoroughbred aftercare nonprofit.

The TAA was established in response to the overwhelming need for a mechanism to ensure the legitimacy of Thoroughbred aftercare organizations and to hold accountable those caring for Thoroughbreds through the next chapter of their lives.

"When the three most respected organizations in the Thoroughbred industry provided funding for the TAA, they put their trust in our ability to safeguard the horses and the industry from any potential abuse," recalled the TAA's founding director and current executive board member Madeline Auerbach. "We determined the best way to solve the situation was to create an accreditation process that addressed all of the relevant issues. In order for any retirement group to receive funding, it would meet a set of standards never seen before in our industry."

When owners make the choice to retire and rehome their racehorses, it's unlikely they will be able to ascertain the legitimacy of an aftercare organization's operations. TAA assumes that responsibility by assessing an organization's operations, finances, and business practices. The humane care and welfare of the horses are the foundation of any TAA-accredited organization.

"Our board places great importance on maintaining high standards and being financially responsible and transparent," said TAA-accredited Equine Rescue and Adoption Foundation president Denise LeClair-Robbins. "Being accredited by the TAA reinforces our goals and reassures our donors that we respect their contributions."

TAA's board of directors and staff comprise

TOP: SUZIE PICOU-OLDHAM; BOTTOM LEFT: ERIN SHEA; BOTTOM RIGHT: BRIGHT FUTURES FARM  
OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: TRF; BOTTOM: GWEN DAVIS

equine advocates, as well as Thoroughbred industry participants. As such, they understand the crucial role that education and communication about proper Thoroughbred aftercare play in the crisis of public perception surrounding horse racing and aftercare best practices. An aftercare organization seeking TAA accreditation is assessed based on its efforts to educate the public, media, regulators, community officials, law enforcement personnel, and legislators about humane Thoroughbred aftercare.

Raised and trained with precision, Thoroughbreds are fed, groomed, exercised, and cared for diligently—rain or shine. As these athletes make their exit from racing, they need qualified aftercare staff members and volunteers who know how to care for and meet each individual's physical and psychological needs.

TAA-accredited organizations must prove that they provide a balanced health care management plan for the types of horses under their care and have written procedures easily accessible at all times.

Likewise, the facilities of aftercare organizations seeking accreditation are evaluated and inspected. Requirements vary, depending on the types of Thoroughbreds housed, such as horses on permanent retirement, horses in rehabilitation care, and horses receiving training for a second career.

Once accredited by the TAA, facilities are evaluated for horse health care and facility maintenance numerous times per year to ensure that the off-track Thoroughbreds (OTTBs) are being maintained to the highest of standards.

"Becoming accredited with the TAA and being a part of their community are invaluable," asserts CJ Marinaccio, founder and lead trainer of California-based Win Place Home. "We are so grateful to be working with an organization who feels the same way that we do: Horse care is first and foremost."

Every horse owner's biggest fear is that a horse they previously owned ends up in a dangerous situation. A majority of aftercare organizations work to retrain and then rehome Thoroughbreds to appropri-

ate adopters with hopes that the horses go on to have fulfilling second careers in a number of disciplines. The TAA requires that accredited organizations safeguard their adopted Thoroughbreds and have adequate protocols for screening and following-up with adopters.

To ensure the continued safety of adopted horses, many TAA-accredited organizations provide their adopters with a lifetime guarantee to be able to return an adopted Thoroughbred for any reason. Many also require that the sale of an ad-



**Horses have a better chance at transition when rehomed by an accredited program**

opted horse be vetted and recorded with the aftercare organization.

Michelle Horgan, co-executive director of New Jersey-based New Beginnings Thoroughbreds, attests, "TAA accreditation allows us to retrain and rehome more horses. Over the past five years we have built a trustworthy program that racehorse owners and adopters can count on. We want to be a go-to source for those looking for an OTTB and feel that TAA accreditation validates this."

Accreditation is the cornerstone of the TAA's operation and provides critical support to equine aftercare organizations and subsequently to the racing industry

as a whole. Often referred to as the gold standard in aftercare, TAA's accreditation process is all-encompassing—organizations must complete the TAA's online application, meet its code of standards, agree to both scheduled and random facility inspections, and reapply for accreditation every other year.

"With 81 organizations and growing nationally, the TAA has gained the Good Housekeeping Seal through its tireless accreditation, inspection, and award process," said Jimmy Bell, TAA president and president and racing manager of Godolphin.

In 2020, 34 organizations received accreditation. In total, the TAA provided grants for 81 organizations in 2020, equaling \$3.5 million. Every year the TAA's network of accredited organizations swells to match the demand for credible Thoroughbred aftercare facilities, intensifying the TAA's urgency for increased fundraising to cover grants for each accredited facility.

Bev Dee, founder of Pennsylvania-based Bright Futures Farm, states, "The TAA has helped us with the cost of re-schooling more Thoroughbreds for new careers. It is an expensive undertaking but also a necessity to provide these horses with a good foundation prior to adoption. With TAA's help, we are able to help more Thoroughbreds coming off the track each year than ever before."

"TAA's rigorous accreditation process gives legitimacy to reputable aftercare programs," said Beverly Strauss, Mid-Atlantic Horse Rescue president and TAA organization committee chair. "We are honored to partner with TAA and thrilled that our industry has stepped up to support aftercare and ensure safe futures for our Thoroughbreds. It has made our work here a bit easier. It's all about the horses."

Receiving TAA accreditation proves that an organization provides its Thoroughbreds with the highest level of care and consideration, and these dedicated organizations deserve to be rewarded with meaningful grants that allow them to care for even more retired racehorses. B