



Second Acts

# The Cost of Aftercare

OWNERS SHOULD BUDGET FOR HORSES  
AFTER RACING CAREERS END

By: ALEXANDRA KOKKA

For more than 300 years Thoroughbred racing has been called the “Sport of Kings.” The title stemmed from royal families’ long-standing participation in horse racing, and was sustained by the inherent exclusivity that accompanies the expense to breed, own, and train racehorses.

A lot has changed over the centuries—even in a sport as deep-seated in tradition as horse racing. The relatively recent development of syndicates and microshare ownership has released a proverbial drawbridge, ushering in the next generation of racing owners and participants.

For example, 5,100 MyRacehorse microshare owners cheered Got Stormy to victory Aug. 14 in the Fourstardave Handicap (G1T) at Sara-



Despite a serious injury during his racing career, Captain Chaos recovered from surgery and today is active in equitation

toga Race Course. For just \$45, anyone with a MyRacehorse account had the opportunity to purchase microshares in the horse and experience the whirlwind of owning—on some small level—a graded stakes winner.

This newfound accessibility to ownership does not mean Thoroughbreds suddenly have become less expensive. It only means the costs are dispersed among more individuals. In fact, the latest summer Thoroughbred sales would argue the *royal* value of young Thoroughbreds is quite strong, with the average yearling at the Fasig-Tipton Select sale bringing \$408,556.

Cost is always a factor in horse racing. The industry’s concern for aftercare—and the discussion of the cost of aftercare—is a new and slightly naive one.

Most within the industry recognize

the development of Thoroughbreds for racing is a big-ticket investment. Yet—somehow lost in translation—a fictitious idea that aftercare is a minor expense still lingers. Now, to be fair, there are considerable cost reductions from racehorse development to post-racing careers, but there are still many factors to budget.

**A**fter almost a decade of collecting financial information and data from more than 81 accredited organizations, the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance sought to determine where the industry is in terms of understanding the expense of securing Thoroughbreds a soft landing. In short, what does it cost to retire, retrain, and rehome Thoroughbreds after their racing careers are complete? Along with that, how much of the expense of aftercare is perhaps too dependent on in-kind services?

have them evaluated by our veterinarian so we know what level of training they are capable of.

“If a horse needs time to rehabilitate from an injury or other problems, the cost to keep a horse there is \$500 per month,” Hirt reported from the Michigan-based organization. “Although we have had horses that were in rehabilitation for as long as a year, the average rehabilitation time before going into training is three months.”

With the high cost of medical expenses and somewhat unpredictable outcomes, some might question the value of rehabilitation and what the quality of life would be for the horse. Like many other people at TAA-accredited organizations, Equine Rescue of Aiken president Jim Rhodes has seen great outcomes in Thoroughbreds with fractures and suspensory injuries. These horses have gone on to have long, happy lives in their adopted homes.

ter part of their lives being conditioned for speed, the time and effort needed to train an OTTB for a second career can vary greatly.

“As long as the horse is transitioned from the track to a TAA organization, they are very adoptable, and we firmly believe there is a home for every horse,” said Kim Smith, executive director for Second Stride. “Most of the horses we have received have risen above our expectations.”

OTTB trainer Arianna Barzman-Grennan lends a West Coast perspective on the retraining process and costs at CANTER California.

“On average our horses receive two hours of attention per day, five days per week, including ground work, grooming, training, trail riding, and more,” Barzman-Grennan said. “The costs of retraining a horse depend on board and trainer costs. Most work is done by volunteers who work with the horses. When trainer costs are incurred, it can range from \$500 to \$1,500 per month [per horse].”

There are a variety of reasons an OTTB is designated a sanctuary resident versus being retrained and offered for adoption. Age, physical limitation, personality, previous careers, owner/connection designated retirement are just some of the scenarios seen at TAA-accredited sanctuary facilities. The average lifespan of a horse is 25 years, and a majority of Thoroughbreds retire from racing by their fifth birthday; therefore, sanctuary residents are not only a long-term commitment, but—as their bodies age—can be an expensive one as well.

“The age and general health of our horses vary so widely,” attests Old Friends founder and president Michael Blowen. “Currently, our oldest horse, the stallion You and I, is 30. He has been with us since 2011, so 10 years. We’ve had others that we lost in a year or two. But on average I would say five to 10 years. We have roughly calculated about \$7,300 to \$7,500 [per horse] annually, including feed, most supplies, and staff—or around \$20 a day.”

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**—Trainer Arianna Barzman-Grennan on the retraining process and costs at CANTER California**

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In a perfect world, every horse retiring from racing would arrive at the aftercare organization sound, healthy, and—after a little training—ready to be adopted. The reality is that a majority of off-track Thoroughbreds need time to be introduced to “life in the slow lane” and rehabilitate any injuries.

“When a horse comes into our program, we give them approximately one month to adjust before any training begins,” said TAA-accredited Beyond the Roses executive director and founder Gail Hirt. “This also gives us time to

Captain Chaos, a son of Tapit who sold for \$385,000 at the 2015 Keeneland September Sale but after seven starts sustained a slab fracture to his right foreleg during training, would bounce back after racing.

“Captain Chaos was brought to us about four years ago after having rehabbed for eight months from an extensive surgery,” Rhodes said. “He was adopted and now lives here in Aiken with his owner and is still being ridden almost everyday doing equitation.”

As Thoroughbreds have spent the bet-



In an effort to offset the costs incurred, many organizations request or require donations from the owner or trainer who retires a Thoroughbred.

"We have a few very generous owners that supply annual stipends: the Lewis family helps support Silver Charm, Samantha Siegel of JMS, Adena Springs, Baoma, LNJ Foxwoods, and the Bafferts (Bob and Jill), among others, all contribute annually for horses that have retired here," Blownen said. "Many make a one-time contribution, usually on arrival and I would say that averages \$5,000."

But Caribbean Thoroughbred Aftercare's co-founder and CFO Kelley Stobie knows all too well the disparities between horse racing hubs in different geographical regions.

"We ask owners to pay \$100 for a horse to come to CTA; 80% of the time we get this," Stobie said. "No monthly support is given to any specific horse."

Designated funding from Puerto Rican horsemen averages around \$2,000 per month. Meanwhile, it costs CTA around \$530 per month, per horse. On average, CTA receives and cares for 40 Thoroughbreds per year.

**W**hile the TAA helps raise money for TAA-accredited organizations, it's important to understand the chasm between the good work that has been done and the immense funding need that still exists.

In 2019 the TAA surveyed its accredited organizations to gain an understanding of the in-kind services and supplies received by each organization. Reportedly 92% of respondents indicated receiving in-kind donations in at least one of the following categories: medical, feed, horse care, or transportation. Of the 65 organizations that received donations in kind, only 23% indicated the donations were received on a regular basis.

The TAA's findings substantiated the unpredictable nature of in-kind donations, backing the opinion that aftercare funding requires a more stable source upon which organizations can base their budget.



**Game On Dude (right) and Little Mike are paddock pals at Old Friends, where different contribution options keep things up and running**



**Retired stallion You and I, now 30, is enjoying his 10th year at Old Friends, where the care of each horse costs about \$20 a day**

In 2020 the TAA granted \$3.4 million, which provided funds for approximately 3,000 Thoroughbreds. TAA aftercare organizations reported the average expense per Thoroughbred in 2020 to be approximately \$644 per month. The average TAA donation only covered

20-30% of annual budget costs for each organization.

The strides we as an industry have made toward facilitating aftercare is something to be celebrated. With eyes wide open, we can make horse racing sustainable for generations to come. **B**

LAURA BATTLES PHOTOS