

# *For the Love of the Horse*

## Racehorse Retirement in California

*By Mary Forney*

While the news media is quick to jump all over tragic stories focused on horse breakdowns, it often overlooks the incredible generosity and concern of the people involved in the world of horse rehabilitation and retirement. Possibly it is overlooked because much of the work involved happens behind the scenes.

In our tightly-knit society peculiar to the racetrack, there are a myriad of networks linking owners, trainers, and backstretch personnel with farms, equine rehabilitation and retraining facilities, veterinary schools, and charitable organizations, each connected by all manner of caring intermediaries. Unsung – and unseen – heroes abound. There always seems to be “someone who knows someone” who can find the right place for a racehorse at the end of its career.

In his six years as a horse owner, Pablo Suarez says he has learned “along the way” about the reality of placing injured horses. “I usually put the word out through farm managers, my trainer, and other horsemen, then select the best location for the horse from there,” he said. “Most of my horses become either jumpers or riding horses,” Suarez continued. “I’ve sent horses to farms all across North America. It just takes a little legwork, but it is definitely worthwhile.”

Longtime owner Bob Zamarripa acquires his racehorses through private sales from farms that include a clause in the sales contract agreeing to take fillies back to the farm at the end of their racing careers. When he must deal with retiring a gelding, Zamarripa relies on the networks of his trainer, Juan Garcia. “Juan has all the connections, and always does the right thing,” he said.

Yet, despite the good intentions of most owners, absent any organized, reliable system for the retirement of injured and

aging racehorses, too many horses end up “falling through the cracks.” The question of what to do with a horse that can no longer race often takes owners, especially new owners, off guard. Sadly, it can involve heartbreaking decisions – on top of the fact that the owner is also facing sudden financial loss.

“I have people call me up and just burst into tears when I say I’ll take their horse,” said Pricilla Clark, manager of Tranquility Farm, a 501(c)(3) racing charity committed to finding useful second careers for Thoroughbreds. “Some new owners are really distraught about what to do with their horse,” she said.

Clark is fully aware of the impact on owners of the unexpected financial burden, as well. “The reason that the horses are leaving the track is that they are not useful,” she said. “If they’re not racing sound, they’re not riding sound either. They are basically a money pit for a while, with an unknown value as a recycled riding horse. And it’s next to impossible to break even on rehab and retraining, especially when you figure in the costs of boarding and vetting.”

According to Clark, the current situation “doesn’t give owners anything to hang their hat on. It needs to be a little more expeditious than blind luck. Under present circumstances,” she said, “it’s always a miracle when a horse is saved, and that’s inadequate.”

That “something to hang their hat on” is precisely the goal of a newly-formed TOC committee studying the issue of equine retirement. Under the direction of TOC board member and Secretary Madeline Auerbach, the committee is seeking to put a public face on the process that provides humane care for our equine athletes throughout their lifespan.

The Equine Retirement Committee’s goals include educating



owners about their options, providing an accessible network of interested parties who accept retired racehorses, continued support of California's equine retirement facilities, and – most importantly – developing a funding mechanism (known as “CARMA” for CA Equine Retirement Management Account) to ensure viability of those charitable facilities for years to come.

The benefits of such a funding mechanism are broad reaching and will benefit our industry greatly – from the racing plans of individual owners to the public image of horseracing. It will provide a safety net for owners. It will give a tremendous public relations boost to racing, mitigating the perception that racehorses are routinely abused or slaughtered.

Fortunately, as a group, Thoroughbred owners are not only generous in spirit, but they are generous with their pocketbooks – having donated through TOC more than a half million dollars to the four major California equine retirement facilities over the last ten years. CARMA seeks to ensure that all participants share equally in the responsibility for the lifelong, humane care of our equine athletes.

The fund will give owners the freedom to focus on their vital purpose – staying in the horseracing business! As Clark explained, “Most owners are not really professional horse people; they are from other walks of life. To throw it back on them to make these decisions is unfair, and it puts them in a difficult financial position as well.” CARMA will “give them some confidence that they can do this and still be responsible and ethical people.”

Another factor in play involves the

reality that some owners are embarrassed to ask for charity when they cannot afford to rehabilitate an injured horse. “If this fund is created,” said Clark, “it is going to create a level of comfort among trainers and owners so they don't feel there's some stigma in calling us up when they have an injured horse. When people are pitching in their little bit, they will feel ‘this is part of racing.’ I'm hoping that will make people more comfortable about donating their horses.”

Among the charitable facilities in California offering equine retirement and/or rehabilitation are California Equine Retirement Foundation (CERF), Glen Ellen Vocational Academy (GEVA), Tranquility Farm, and United Pegasus Foundation (see sidebar for contact information). Other options for injured or aging racehorses include donation to therapeutic riding programs and schools, and donation to veterinary schools.

Stay tuned for further information about CARMA and the work being done by TOC's Equine Retirement Committee. Never content with the “status quo,” California Thoroughbred owners are once again leading the way, and setting a stellar example for the racing industry nationally, by working to improve the lives of our horses, the financial stability of owners, and the integrity of the sport.

### California Equine Retirement Foundation (CERF)

[www.cerfhorses.org](http://www.cerfhorses.org)

(951) 926-4190

Contact: Grace Belcour

### Glen Ellen Vocational Academy, Inc.

[www.glenellenfarms.com/geva](http://www.glenellenfarms.com/geva)

(888) 527-8092

Contact: Pamela Berg

### Tranquility Farm

[www.tranquilityfarmtbs.org](http://www.tranquilityfarmtbs.org)

(661) 823-0307

Contact: Priscilla Clark

### United Pegasus Foundation

[www.unitedpegasus.com](http://www.unitedpegasus.com)

(626) 279-1306

Contact: Helen Meredith

