

Bad Sports: Why our animal kin will never be willing competitors

From [EthicalGlobe.com](https://www.ethicalglobe.com)

November 2023

Indeed, it seems that as far back as documented human history goes, there are records of our animal kin being used for entertainment, gambling, and as a statement of status and prowess. The suffering endured is incomprehensible.



Humans have a long and bloody history of using other animals for “sport”. Gazelles, crocodiles, antelopes, jackals, ostriches, hyenas, lions, elephants, bears, cheetahs, and many other species were pitted to the death against each other or against the gladiators [in the Roman Colosseum](#). In [Medieval Europe](#), bear-baiting, rat-baiting, bull-baiting, or dog or cock fights were everyday entertainment.

Archaeological records suggest events such as horse racing date back to ancient Syria, Egypt and Greece. Greyhound racing is believed to have begun several millennia ago among the Bedouin tribes of Africa and Asia.

Indeed, it seems that as far back as documented human history goes, there are records of our animal kin being used for entertainment, gambling, and as a statement of status and prowess. The suffering endured is incomprehensible.

Today, sports featuring other animals represent multi-billion dollar industries, especially as they are closely tied to gambling. The species most likely to be used in sports events are horses, bovines (calves, bulls, and steers), dogs, and cocks.

The most common activities considered “legitimate” sports are horse racing, greyhound racing, sled dog racing, and rodeos. There are also illegal fighting events throughout the world.

Even a cursory investigation shows that significant suffering continues, whether a sport is considered legitimate or not.

What supporters of animal sports say

For the purpose of understanding why sports such as horse racing or rodeos continue, it’s important to identify the reasons why people support them.

As we’ve already mentioned, sporting events that use non-human animals make a lot of money. Revenue from horse racing, for example, is [predicted to exceed USD 793.9 billion](#) by 2030, growing by just under nine percent per year.

Revenue for greyhound racing worldwide is hard to establish, but stats suggest that the annual turnover of betting on dog races amounts to [£740 million](#) in the UK alone. With 116 tracks for greyhound racing across the globe, it’s clear that this is a high-stakes industry.

With this much money involved, it’s unsurprising that people involved in these sports don’t want them to stop. They argue that animal-centred sports create countless jobs and are vital to the economy.

They also feel that sports featuring other animals are built on important cultural and sporting traditions and that animal freedom activists threaten a way of life.

It’s notable that many of the arguments in favour of animal sports centre on the human experience and how humans benefit rather than the individual and collective experience of the animals involved.

Those who do attempt to centre other animals in their arguments will say that sports enable the animals involved to exhibit natural behaviours (and behaviours that have been bred into them over millennia) – for example, greyhounds are bred for racing. Without greyhound racing to create demand, the argument goes, greyhounds would eventually die out. Surely, supporters say, it’s better for greyhounds to race than to not exist.

Proponents of these sports will also argue that certain animals enjoy participating in sports as it provides them with exercise and mental stimulation. They believe that sports can enhance the wellbeing of those bred for athletic purposes.

To underpin all of the above, we're told that there are regulations and guidelines in place to minimise harm to non-human species and to protect the welfare of the individual animals involved.

The ethical problems of using our animal kin in sports

Our view at Ethical Globe is that none of these arguments justifies using our animal kin in sports.

Thankfully, people from all walks of life are beginning to recognise that sports such as horse racing and greyhound racing compromise the physical and emotional welfare of the animals bred to participate and contribute to widespread problems such as overbreeding.

Let's look at these issues more closely:

Physical Welfare

Injury and fatality

Animals involved in sports are at risk of injuries and even fatalities.

Horses in horse racing, for example, often suffer from musculoskeletal injuries, fractures, and other health issues, which can be life-threatening. Indeed, if a horse suffers a leg fracture, in most cases, they will be euthanised immediately.

[Animal Aid's Racehorse Death Watch website](#) brings this issue into stark relief, detailing the death of every thoroughbred horse on a racecourse in Britain since 2007. A staggering 2,696 deaths have been recorded in 6,078 days *in the UK alone*. Some of these horses were killed purely for pulling up at fence and not completing the race.

Grey2K USA is a charity campaigning to end greyhound racing. They say that [12,951 greyhound injuries were reported on American racetracks](#) between 2010 and 2021, including injuries such as fractures, head trauma, electrocution, and broken backs.

At just two racetracks in West Virginia, at least 295 greyhounds have been killed or euthanised as a result of racing within the last 12 years.

Grey2K USA also says that the Greyhound Board of Great Britain's 2021 reports identified 22,767 injuries, including 2,166 greyhounds killed due to injury.

The [Animal Legal Defense Fund](#) highlights the bleak prospects of horses, bulls, steer and calves forced to participate in rodeos, saying that they frequently "suffer broken ribs, backs, and legs, torn tails, punctured lungs, internal organ damage, ripped tendons, torn ligaments, snapped necks, and agonising deaths".

It is also widespread for animals who can no longer participate in sports due to injury, age or refusal to take part to be euthanised because they have outlived their economic value.

Overworking

Non-human animals in sports are sometimes pushed to their limits, enduring gruelling training and competition schedules that can lead to physical exhaustion and chronic health problems.

In rodeos, for example, [calves that are roped repeatedly](#) during practice sessions may be injured or become so overtired that they have to be replaced. Tools such as electric prods, spurs, and bucking straps are used to scare an animal into performing or behaving in a particular way.

The Animal Legal Defense Fund says that the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association permits individual animals used in rodeos to be confined during transport for as long as 24 hours without receiving food or water.

[Grey 2K USA](#) reports that greyhounds may be forced to run in adverse weather conditions, including extreme heat and cold or thick fog.

Drug use

Accounts persist of cases where animals such as [greyhounds have been fed performance-enhancing drugs](#) to increase their speed on the racetrack. In Australia, regulatory agencies have reported hundreds of greyhound drug-positive tests, including substances such as amphetamine, morphine, and phenobarbitone.

As in humans, these drugs can have serious health consequences for other animals, including long-term damage to their organs.

Emotional Welfare

Stress and anxiety

The high-pressure environment of competitive sports can lead to significant stress and anxiety in animals, affecting their overall wellbeing.

World Animal Protection says that horses, for example, are social animals who would range in groups, and yet racehorses “tend to be housed in isolation and close confinement”. Stress can lead to abnormal and repetitive behaviours such as “crib-biting (repetitive oral behaviour where the horse sucks in a large amount of air) and weaving (a repetitive behaviour where the horse sways on its forelegs, shifting its weight back and forth)”.

Grey2K USA reports that racing greyhounds in the US can be [confined for between 20 to 23 hours a day](#).

Many of the events in a rodeo are designed to elicit a fear response from the animals taking part in order for the human participants to demonstrate their skill and prowess. Horses and bulls buck in reaction to being ridden in a way that constricts on their sensitive underbelly or to shake off a predatory attack.

[According to the RSPCA](#), “a study of bull behaviour at rodeos determined that nearly one-third of animals assessed showed signs of distress leading up to the start of bull-riding events and that

those who did not react may have either become habituated to the aversive situation or have given up and endure the negative experience”. The latter is state known as “learned helplessness”.

Separation from natural behaviour

Many sports require animals to perform actions that are unnatural for them, leading to confusion and emotional distress. As we’ve already mentioned, rodeos are a perfect example of this. A calf, for example, would never choose to be chased and roped as a natural behaviour.

[Greyhounds who face long hours of confinement during their racing “careers” miss out on a wide range of experiences](#) that most of us consider integral to the experience of being a dog. They have limited opportunities for socialisation and may show signs of anxiety such as separation anxiety, freezing on walks, difficulty in toilet training, reactive behaviour towards unfamiliar people, dogs or items/situations, or destructive behaviour.

Bonding and attachment

Species such as dogs and horses can form strong bonds with humans. When they are used for sport and treated as commodities, this can lead to emotional suffering. They may lose contact with a beloved caregiver when they are retired, for example.

Exploitation

Commercialisation and commodification

The use of other animals in sports often revolves around financial gain. The focus on profit can result in disregarding the animals’ emotional and physical wellbeing. And too often, if an individual ceases to represent a profit, then they will be retired, put into rescue, or killed.

Further, treating animals as commodities for entertainment or competition undermines their intrinsic value as sentient beings.

Commodification and commercialisation are directly feeding into problems such as overbreeding. For example, even though the numbers steadily fall, thousands of greyhound puppies are bred yearly to feed the racing industry. [Grey2K USA](#) says that there are significant discrepancies between the number of greyhound puppies born and the number reported as registered racers, suggesting that some simply “disappear” when they don’t make the grade.

Lack of Consent

For those of us concerned with animal rights and freedom, one overwhelming fact takes centre stage: Animals used in sports do not have the ability to give informed consent.

We’re often told by racing advocates that horses or greyhounds, for example, are enthusiastic participants who race for the thrill. It’s an appealing thought. Who can deny the joy of a dog with the zoomies or an unfettered horse galloping across a field?

But the reality is that participation in racing is coerced through training and conditioning. It's not about a spontaneous moment of physical activity or joy. It's done to a human timetable and to human rules.

And let's not forget that there are undeniable risks to safety and wellbeing that non-human animals cannot agree to in advance.

Human athletes are able to participate voluntarily and make decisions about their own wellbeing. They can also decide when they want to retire or when the circumstances aren't right to race.

What happens to a non-human animal who refuses to race? It can be a matter of life or death.

Conclusion

While there's no denying that some human caretakers and their non-human charges have a deep and abiding connection, the issue of consent is clear. Any species other than humans participating in sports do so because they have no choice.

While sport may provide an outlet for mental stimulation, exercise, and drives that we humans have purposely bred into other animals, it's done on our timetable and with the restrictions we choose to impose.

We cannot ignore the thousands of injuries and fatalities that happen in the name of sport every year. These are not happening to informed individuals who signed up to compete knowing the risks but to sentient beings robbed of choice.