

Durability

by

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As a junior member back in the early 1970's, I became pretty good friends with another junior competitor in my club. We had two very different levels of commitment to the sport. From the beginning, I was “all pigeons all the time”, and he raced pigeons as a hobby. He came from a fairly athletic family, and in fact, I believe his dad may have even held the world record for poll vaulting in the seniors' age group. His older brother played football in high school, and was responsible for the saving tackle that led our high school to the California 3A CIF championship. My friend was also a very good athlete, but he was constantly plagued with injuries. Ultimately, what pretty much ended his sports career, at least while I knew him was a knee to the head during a summer basketball practice. During this episode, he received a very severe concussion and was told not to play any type of contact sport for a while. As a friend, I was always pulling for him to do well in his sporting events, but after a while, the constant injuries became something of a source of embarrassment for him. Fortunately, he was very smart so he had options that went well beyond a sports career.

Later, when I took up Brazilian Jiu-jitsu (a type of wrestling), I shared many of the same frustrations that my friend had experienced. From the beginning, I was in love with the sport, but the flat fact of the matter was that by 39 years of age, I was experiencing a never-ending series of serious injuries. Those serious injuries were pretty easy to explain. As you get older, muscle mass tends to decrease, exposing tendons and ligament to more strenuous wear and tear. Wrestling is a very demanding sport that uses every muscle in the body, and it is hard to wrestle without aggravating existing injuries. In some sports you can do other types of exercise to stay in shape, but wrestling is really not one of those sports. In fact, it is difficult to stay in good enough shape unless you wrestle at least three times a week. If an injury is so serious as to keep you out of action at all, it is generally serious enough to keep you out for two weeks or longer and by that time you are out of shape. Once out of shape, it is very easy to get hurt again especially during the first week back at practice. This is generally when the more serious injuries are likely to occur. As you get older, it becomes tougher to stay shape, and injuries make this even more difficult.

Over the years, I have watched a lot of professional sports, especially basketball. I like basketball because it is very fast paced. As a result of the game's tempo, there are many

injuries in this sport as well. While some are due to physical contact, many are caused by the long-term wear and tear. While talented, there are a number of players that are just like my friend in that they often suffer from nagging injuries. Like Jiu-jitsu, basketball is a demanding sport and conditioning is critical. Because there is little time to practice between games, many of the often-injured athletes have trouble getting back into shape, and as a result they wind up getting hurt again, much like I did in Jiu-jitsu.

Tracy McGrady of the Houston Rockets, Corey Maggette of the Golden State Warriors, and Andrew Bynum of the Los Angeles Lakers are three good examples of injury prone players. All three are very important to their team, and yet it has been difficult to count on any of them. Unlike Jiu-jitsu, basketball is a team sport, and to be a cohesive unit, all of the players, especially the starters, need to be available to be in the lineup all the time. Tracy was certainly one of the better players to play the game, but since joining the Houston Rockets, he has been out of the lineup as much or more than he has played. Corey's injuries are generally not as serious, but he seems to miss at least a game or two a week, and this affects his team's rhythm both when he is in or out of the lineup. Andrew is a young, big, raw talent who is only going to develop through time on the court. However, about the time he gets into shape, and starts coming out of his shell, he experiences a serious injury. Although he is young, his lack of court experience is keeping him from getting better, and the injuries themselves are severe enough to shorten the longevity of his career. In a sense, through no fault of his own, he is burning the candle at both ends. The point I am trying to make is that these franchises have a huge investment in these players, and yet these players are so frequently or seriously injured that they can't be counted on. It makes you wonder if these teams wouldn't be better off with a lesser player that wasn't injured as often. You do have to wonder about a team like Golden State who recently signed Corey to a multi-year contract when they knew full-well about his physical history when he was with his former team, the Los Angeles Clippers.

Other players are not necessarily as injury prone as they lack a feel for the game. This doesn't mean that they can't play well, but through their hard play, they put themselves in the position of getting hurt. Part of what separates Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan from other players is how infrequently they get hurt. They are highly durable players that are available every game year in and year out. As superstars, they take the same risks as other players, without suffering the devastating injuries. They avoid injuries simply because they instinctively know "When" to take the risk. Some of this is judgment or anticipation, but the game happens too fast for many of their risks to be well thought out. Therefore, some of this ability is innate. They recognize where the opponent is weak and they take advantage of it in ways that even they can't comprehend.

One never likes to say it, but my son has been doing Brazilian Jiu-jitsu since he was 13, and so far, he has never missed a practice due to injury. When I asked him about his lack of injuries, his response was, "Because I was wrestling adults when I was 13, I was never the strongest, so I had to rely on technique. Technique allows you to take advantage of other people's mistakes, but to take advantage of those mistakes, you must develop

anticipation for what your opponent is about to do. The better your anticipation, the less likely you are to get injured.”

Although I rarely participate any more, I like to watch Jiu-jitsu whenever possible. Jiu-jitsu rankings are determined through a progression of belts (white, blue, purple, brown, and black belts in that order of progression). At every school there is a mixture of true athletes and the also-rans. Over time, the better athletes tend to rise to the top, but early on, everyone starts out about the same way in that they use their strength wherever possible. When bodies are slamming into each other on a regular basis, something has got to give, and as a result there are many injuries amongst the white belts. Generally, most participants are white belts for a period of two years. Usually, about half of any white belt class will quit early because of the injuries. Some sustain serious injuries very early in the program, others just get sick of being hurt and beat up all of the time. Another quarter of the participants seem to quit right after they receive their blue belt. Once past this point, most of the easily injured participants are already gone, but others will still experience injuries due to the general wear and tear of the sport. By the time most competitors become purple belts, the often injured are completely gone from the sport and the remaining participants are so experienced that they are hard to place in a position where they can get injured.

Several years ago, I read a study about genetic markers associated with natural strength in athletes. I do not remember the exact symbols used for these markers, so I will use ii, iI, and II to represent these markers. The marker ii represents a lesser level of strength. The marker iI represented those with some level of strength, and II represented the truly strong. The study strongly suggested that the vast majority of professional athletes were in the II category. This means that while technique and intelligence may be valuable factors, having the II trait in the first place was far more important. If technique and intelligence was of any importance, it was pretty much exclusively relevant to those within each specific group. In other words, it might be an advantage to be the II grouping and have technique and intelligence, but technique and intelligence were probably not going to get you to the top level without having the II trait in the first place. Although the study didn't head in this direction, I would surmise that what allows II athletes to rise to the top in such large numbers is that athletics come more easily to true athletes, as they have the genetics for unusual strength and endurance. Because they are unusually strong they are less easily hurt while competing against the less strong. However, as they move up the levels of competition, the strong find themselves competing against other strong athletes and at this level technique and intelligence can be an advantage. I say 'can' because in other articles, I have eluded to the fact that intelligence tends to work against many athletes simply because competition is work and work can be painful. Part of intelligence is realizing that you have choices, so when something becomes painful, the choice for many intelligent athletes is to quit. There are those that capable of using their intelligence to overcome pain by increasing the pace. The famous Boston Celtic basketball star, John Havlicek, used to say that if he was tired, he knew the other player was at least as tired, so he would start running even harder.

Several months ago, my friend and renowned fancier Mauricio Jemal, sent me an interesting article. Now, before I begin discussing this article, let me first remind you about something that I have written on numerous occasions. Throughout my writing, I have continued to state the importance of racing a pigeon for at least three years and/or 25 races. While there is clearly more risk associated with each race exposure, the fact of the matter is that many more average pigeons than champions are lost over time. In fact, by the end of the third year of racing, very few weak, sick, stupid or easily injured pigeons remain.

Now let's get back to the article that Mauricio Jemal sent me. I am very pleased to say that the author of this excellent article, Joe Drape of the New York Times, has graciously agreed to allow me to quote his article in its entirety. I would like to point out that there is a lot to learn from this article:

The New York Times

Breeding for Speed, Ignoring Durability

By [JOE DRAPE](#)

Published: May 11, 2008

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The Hancocks have been raising racehorses for four generations and not too long ago, Arthur III kept to a rule he learned from his father, Bull Hancock Jr.: Never breed to a stallion with fewer than 25 career starts. That rule was good enough to produce the [Kentucky Derby](#) champions Gato Del Sol in 1982 and Sunday Silence in 1989. Both were strong, sound horses who could run all day. Gato Del Sol turned out to be a bust as a sire, and commercial breeders here ignored Sunday Silence, who nearly won the Triple Crown but had to go to Japan to become one of the world's leading stallions.

By the time Arthur III bred his third Derby winner, Fusaichi Pegasus, who prevailed in 2000, he had long abandoned the 25-start rule. FuPeg, as the colt was known, was a son of Mr. Prospector, who had raced 14 times; his mother was Angel Fever — a daughter of Danzig — who made it to the track twice before being hurt and being retired from racing.

The match sacrificed heartiness for speed, but that was in demand in auction rings. Hancock sold Fusaichi Pegasus for \$4 million as a yearling.

"You got to survive and make money, and you do that by breeding something fashionable that people will buy," said Hancock, who has sold half siblings of FuPeg for \$1 million to \$4 million. "I cannot afford to breed the kind of horses that I once did."

So horsemen are getting what they pay for: pedigrees that produce precocious, fast and fragile runners.

Long before the filly [Eight Belles](#) shattered her front ankles and was euthanized on the track after finishing second in the Kentucky Derby last Saturday, the industry had conceded that American

racehorses were less sound than ever. In 1960, for example, the average United States racehorse made 11.3 starts a year; last year, the average was 6.3.

“We have long been aware that certain stallions have defects in their progeny,” Wayne McIlwraith, a surgeon and past president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners. “They may have great 2-year-olds, but often don’t have many 3- or 4-year-olds racing. We’re seeing more catastrophic injury now, and it’s not going away. There isn’t any question that when we breed for the fastest horse, we lose robustness.”

In fact, the most expensive sires barely rate a mention on the Durability List, which looks at how many of a sire’s foals actually make it to the racetrack — an indication of collective soundness — as well as how many starts his offspring average.

Distorted Humor, the \$300,000-fee sire of the 2003 Derby winner Funny Cide, and Smart Strike (\$150,000) are the only sires with six-figure stud fees among the top 100 horses on the Durability List. Nearly 82 percent of Distorted Humor’s runners and 80 percent of Smart Strike’s reached the racetrack.

Eight Belles’s sire, Unbridled’s Song, on the other hand, commands \$150,000 a mating, but was ranked 278th. He gets only 65 percent of his foals to the racetrack, according to equineline.com, below the national average of 71 percent for thoroughbreds. His offspring average 12.7 starts a career, which is also below the average of 16 starts for the breed.

“There is a statistical prejudice, we think, against fashionable sires because the offspring of those stallions are more likely to be retired from racing sooner, especially fillies who are attractive broodmare prospects,” said Ed Bowen, the president of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation. “At the same time, it’s hard to believe that there would be that much decline because of horse-management issues.”

Dr. Larry Bramlage, an equine surgeon, says a supercharged auction market is even transforming the physical attributes of modern thoroughbreds. When horse racing was a pastime rather than a business, families like the Whitneys and the Vanderbilts and breeding farms like Calumet and the Hancocks’ Claiborne made stallions out of the horses who had performed well and over time.

It was the era of Iron Horses like the 1941 Triple Crown champion, Whirlaway, who made 60 starts in his career; and the 1946 champion, Assault, who raced as a 7-year-old. In fact, the 11 Triple Crown winners together made 104 starts at age 4 or older and won 57 of them.

“You used to see a taller thoroughbred, narrow chested and bit knock-kneed, who could run forever, but not as fast,” Bramlage said.

Affirmed, who in 1978 became the 11th and most recent Triple Crown champion, was perhaps the epitome of this body type. He raced 29 times, won 22 and sired more than 80 stakes winners and 9 champions. Over the past 30 years, billions spent on horses — \$1.1 billion alone at auction last year — has put a premium on what Bramlage described as a “toed-in, wide-chested, lighter-bone horse built for speed.”

“The sport — society, really — has become big-event motivated,” Bramlage said. “Owners will pay a premium to race on Derby or Breeders’ Cup day. We want them to compete immediately at the highest level, and we don’t care for how long.”

Look no further than the current Derby champion, [Big Brown](#), to see how the future-is-now logic is often rewarded. His majority owners, International Equine Acquisitions Holdings, bought 75 percent of him for \$3 million last September, after the colt rocketed to an 11 1/4 -length victory in his debut on the turf at Saratoga.

Michael Iavarone, an I.E.A.H. co-president, said he believed he was buying a Derby horse, but the immediate goal was the \$1 million Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf race the next month at Monmouth Park in New Jersey. When Big Brown sustained an abscess in the sole of his left front hoof, which caused a wall separation, he missed that race. He sustained the same injury in his right front hoof in December and was sidelined until March 5, when he was entered in an allowance race on the turf at Gulfstream Park in Florida.

When the race was taken off the grass because of rain and Big Brown rolled to an effortless 12 3/4-length victory on a wet dirt track, his owners were, indeed, Derby bound. Big Brown next won the Florida Derby, remained 4-0 at Churchill Downs, and now I.E.A.H. is expecting to announce a \$50 million deal for the colt's breeding rights any day.

If recent history holds to form, Big Brown will be retired to the breeding shed after the [Belmont Stakes](#), perhaps as an undefeated Triple Crown champion. Can his owners do any better financially by continuing to run him?

Hardly. The career leader in earnings is Cigar, who won \$10 million in purses running through age 6 in the 1990s. Smarty Jones, the 2004 Derby champion, surpasses that amount each season at stud, mating with 110 mares for \$100,000 each.

What kind of sire might Big Brown become?

His father, Boundary, was a miler who sired mostly milers. His dam, Mien, has impressive stamina influences. In terms of the Durability List, Boundary is above average in the percentage of foals he gets to the racetrack and the number of starts his offspring average over a lifetime: 77 percent and 17.1 starts.

Those fundamentals are somewhat encouraging to Hancock, but he knows it is not enough to turn around the breeding business's flawed thinking, which is turning out flawed horses.

"We've lost sight of trying to breed a sound solid racehorse," Hancock said. "I'm guilty of it, too. The danger of it is great. Like Willie Nelson said, 'Greed is terminal.'"

As you can see, Bull Hancock never bred a horse that hadn't been to 25 starts. His reasoning was simply that in doing so, he maintained the durability of his horses by weeding out those horses that were easily injured or that couldn't stand up to the long term rigors of racing. Some will say that with the exception of telephone wires, pigeons are probably more injury free than horses. However, horses run around a track and when they pull up lame, it is for all to see. Our pigeons are scattered out over the racecourse, so when something goes wrong, they don't come home and we are never certain of the circumstance. Having had pigeons return home late from training tosses, I am reasonably sure that pigeons do pull muscles. Having had pigeons hit wires, I am reasonably confident that these are pigeons that do not see well, and given enough chances, these pigeons will weed themselves out. Ultimately, after 25 races, we can be more assured that the remaining pigeons have been well tested to the rigors of racing. I would like to point out that I was using the three years/25 mile criteria well before the Joe Drape

penned his excellent article “Breeding for Speed, Ignoring Durability.” I know a little about horseracing, and that is why Mauricio sent me the article in the first place. I do not know and have not read anything from the people mentioned in the article, yet we have come to virtually the exact same conclusion.

I am sure that by this point most of you are reading this article with at least a twinge of anxiety. Similar to what Joe has describes in his article on horse racing, our sport has also fallen to speed, quick success, and greed. These days, the owner of a single series champion can't wait to collect his money from the buyer lest he should lose this valuable commodity to a wire or a hawk. The purchaser (usually a breeding farm) is seeing dollar signs in the offspring, and the sub-purchaser can't wait to throw all of his weight behind an unproven offspring from this single series champion. One series is simply not a big enough test to prove much of anything, and building around the product of these small tests is having a significant impact on our sport. The fact is that all we can really say about a single series winner is that it hasn't disproven itself as a potential winner, but we won't know the full answer to that question for another 20 races, which these days means that we probably will never know the full answer.

Until next time!

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