

We still have jumps racing? Can't get over it



Regardless of the spectacle, the harsh reality is racehorses are continuing to die as a result of jumps racing in Victoria. Image courtesy of The Age.

As Victoria continues to buck the trend on placing a ban on jumps racing, we ask if steeplechasing really is integral to the success of the Warrnambool May Racing Carnival.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

Here we are at that awkward time of year again in Warrnambool when the city's biggest local sporting event – the [May Racing Carnival](#) featuring the Grand Annual Steeplechase – is also the most difficult to embrace.

For no matter how we dress it up, the reality is that jumps racing is on the nose and has been for many years.

Despite this, the powerful figures that surround the “sport” continue to tell us that horses love jumping, that the local economy would wilt without the jumps races, and that those

campaigning to have jumps racing stopped are just a bunch of lefty loopies without a sense of fun.

One of the most vocal “lefty loopies” is, of course, that highly radical and subversive organisation, the RSPCA, which has [an ongoing campaign](#) against the practice on the grounds of animal cruelty.

It appears that the RSPCA is welcome to tackle battery hens, sow stalls, duck shooting, puppy farms and run the cheerful Million Paws Walk, but if it dares to go near the sanctity of the steeplechase, it is accused of being “grandstanding hypocrites,” guilty of euthanasing thousands of unwanted cats and dogs each year.

That is how the former head of the Australian Jumps Racing Association, Rodney Rae, [described the RSPCA president](#) Dr Hugh Wirth in 2011, disregarding the fact that the RSPCA is the group that mops up the sad mess left behind by irresponsible pet owners around Australia.



The Grand National Steeplechase in the United Kingdom

remains one of the most controversial races in the world due to a high number of horse fatalities. Image courtesy of The Huffington Post.

But let's return to jumps racing.

As most people know, this is a sport that no longer exists in any other states except for Victoria and South Australia. Jumps racing finished in Queensland more than 100 years ago. It stopped in WA in 1941 and in NSW in 1997. Tasmania joined their ranks in 2007.

A Senate committee in 1991 suggested it be phased out across Australia over a three-year period and, in 2010, this is exactly where things were headed for Victoria – until the state election prompted local MP Dr Denis Napthine to [pledge \\$2 million to assist the racing industry](#) if the Coalition won office.

The Coalition won and Dr Napthine, who part-owns a racehorse with local Federal MP Dan Tehan*, would be not only the Minister for Racing but also, eventually, Premier. Talk about friends in high places.

Despite the \$2 million having surely being spent by now, horses still die in jumps racing.

It is a nasty, unavoidable truth of the “sport”, even if we try and disguise it behind the green curtain that is hastily erected around the broken horses before they are euthanased on the track.

According to the RSPCA, four horses died in jumps racing last year and there is no doubt that this week, many punters will be watching the three main jumps events at Warrnambool with their hearts in their mouths, hoping all the horses (and riders) make it home, while feeling a deep sense of unease

that the horses are being made to perform this way in the first place.



Spin the Bottle, part-owned by Premier Dr Denis Napthine and local Federal MP Dan Tehan. He is not a jumps racer.

The Warrnambool Grand Annual Steeplechase is 5.5 kilometres long – the Melbourne Cup is 2km shorter – and includes 33 jumps: the most of any steeplechase event anywhere in the world. That is a lot of running and a heck of a lot of jumping, even for a horse that “enjoys” it.

And for all of their Herculean efforts, hardly anyone remembers who wins. Can you name one winner of the Grand Annual Steeplechase? Or the Brierly Steeplechase? Or the Galleywood Hurdle?

At the end of the day, it all seems so cruel and so unnecessary, especially when such a small group of people has any significant investment in jumps racing and its immediate spoils.

The average punter, I believe, would be just as happy to go

along to a three-day racing carnival at the beautiful Warrnambool racecourse and *not* see horses jump.

Some of the most popular – and charming – race carnivals in Victoria (think Dunkeld, Hanging Rock) attract thousands of people not because of the actual racing, but because of the atmosphere, and the chance to dress up and drink champagne for brunch.

Given the increasing awareness and activism around animal rights, especially among young people, it is only a matter of time until jumps racing is banned across Australia.

So why not cancel the jumps at Warrnambool, just for a year? Or maybe for three years, as happened during World War II when the Grand Annual Steeplechase was suspended because of more pressing matters than horse racing.

Then will we know whether the May Racing Carnival can truly stand on its own two legs, rather than relying on horses to stand on all four: despite all that is thrown at them.

*Since writing this piece, [The Age has questioned the connections](#) between Dr Napthine and Midfield Meats managing director Colin McKenna, another part-owner of Spin the Bottle.



Wouldn't punters be just as happy wearing fancy clothes and sipping champagne trackside without the need for jumps racing?