



Access World News

A more humane death for a horse?

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Eight Belles, the only filly in this year's Kentucky Derby, was running against the odds.

She wasn't supposed to win. The fact that this horse was a female meant, in the minds of many, that she wasn't even supposed to place.

Despite the gender or anyone's expectation of her performance, Eight Belles defied the odds by running her heart out and coming in second in a dynamic and historic race.

As television commentators sang her praises just after the finish, the unimaginable happened: The horse collapsed from two broken front ankles and in minutes would be dead — euthanized to spare her the unbearable pain.

The tragic death of this thoroughbred has prompted a serious debate in this country about the treatment of animals — in sport, zoos, circuses and any other "unnatural" setting.

It is a discussion we ought to have. But Eight Belles' demise has raised another issue, articulated no less by a Supreme Court justice: Do we treat animals better than humans even when we decide to kill them?

Justice John Paul Stevens, who voted with the 7-2 majority last month sanctioning a lethal injection protocol used by most death penalty states, believes that the late celebrated racehorse died a better death than most people executed in this country.

Most states use a three-drug cocktail to kill those sentenced to death, and one of the substances administered paralyzes the individual before a third drug stops the heart. Some believe that the paralyzing drug causes extreme agony and pain, if even for a few seconds.

Veterinarians banned this drug years ago in their work. As a result, Eight Belles was spared that suffering.

Too bad we couldn't do the same thing for human beings. But as a colleague sarcastically said as we discussed the matter, "The horse didn't kill anyone."

In other words, it's all right if a convicted person endures pain during punishment.

Stevens, who now believes that capital punishment is unconstitutional, notes that the court's most recent decision on the matter was not about the death penalty per se but about the method used to carry it out.

It is abhorrent that we can have a debate in this country about the best way to take the life of a human being. It borders on absurdity.

The real argument — at the Supreme Court or around the water cooler — ought to be about abolishing this horrendous punishment that most civilized nations already have outlawed.

Yet there are those in politics who use capital punishment as their calling card when they want to talk about getting tough on crime, and there are individuals proud that Texas, for example, holds the record of putting people to death.

I'll never understand that, which is why I have vowed to continue to fight such barbarism. I'm prepared to go to my own deathbed proclaiming the injustice inherent in giving the state the authority to punish by killing.

We ought to be a better people than that, and perhaps one day — probably not in my lifetime — we will come to see the error of our ways.

Through the years, we have been able to save a few from the death chamber, and every one that is spared is a small victory. But many are still waiting to die as the killing machines are cranked up once again after the high court's ruling on lethal injections.

Whether you favor capital punishment or not, consider just one thing. Every time you hear of another individual being sentenced to death or read about one more "victim" of the state who has been executed, please note what one Supreme Court justice now realizes:

In this country, we kill dogs, cats and horses more humanely than we kill people.

AND FURTHERMORE ...

For an online version of Sanders' thoughts on this topic, see his "Mad Minute" video commentary at www.star-telegram.com/extras.

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