

New York City Carriage Horse Falls Near Central Park, Reigniting Old Debate

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A New York carriage horse fell to the ground on Dec. 4, 2011. Animal-rights activists say horses are overworked during the holiday season.

Courtesy Win Animal Rights

The debate over whether carriage horses should be working Manhattan streets has been revived after one fell to its side across the street from New York City's Plaza Hotel this weekend.

Although the horse was helped to its feet and was generally described as fine, an animal-rights activist who videotaped the incident and posted the video online said horses were being overworked during the holidays, among other accusations.

It's the latest skirmish in a long war over whether New York carriage rides are a beloved -- and tightly regulated -- tradition or an inhumane use of horses in a setting inhospitable to their well-being.

Mary Xanthos, 42, is a small-animal veterinarian and an organizer for Win Animal Rights, which holds weekly protests of carriage rides every Sunday afternoon near where the horse fell.

Xanthos said the horse seemed fine after the fall and wasn't returned to use, in accordance with regulations pertaining to horses that fall. This was the only horse fall she had seen herself, she said. Win Animal Rights had been protesting weekly for more than three years, she said.

What she did see on Sunday was that horses weren't getting breaks, which they are supposed to get under city regulations, she said.

"They are working these horses heavily," she said. "One brown horse was profusely foaming at the mouth, and he still gave rides."

The foaming could signal a simple bit problem but it could also be from dehydration, she said, adding that "the water trough on Central Park South was empty and filled with garbage."

"I think the [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] needs to be out there [more]," she said. "The [ASPCA] car drove by but didn't stop once."

The ASPCA is one of the entities charged by the city to oversee the carriage horse operation and enforce its

regulations.

Scoffing at the notion that if the horses were suffering they wouldn't keep pulling the carriages or even leave their stalls, Xanthos said, "They're domestic animals who've been working their whole lives. That doesn't mean they enjoy the work and it's appropriate to put them in harm's way to make money."

Xanthos and her group want to ban the carriages, she said.

"There are things about New York City that can't be changed to make [carriages] humane," she said, citing traffic, concrete, and their being housed many blocks away from where they work.

Xanthos praised the regulation giving carriage horses several weeks of vacation in the summer, but criticized the lack of daily turnout in pasture, which would help maintain horses' "psychological well-being."

"I don't see enforcement of the regulations," she said. "In two hours I saw at least 20 instances where I could give citations."

The Carriage Horse Operators Respond

"Horses trip and fall, and there's nothing abusive or sinister about that," said Stephen Malone, spokesman for Carriage Horse Association of New York.

Malone said every horse has a break at least every two hours for at least 15 minutes, in accordance with regulations. There were two water troughs in Central Park, and there was water in the stalls all the time, he said.

Malone said no violations have been filed to support critics' claims of ill-treatment of horses.

"The ASPCA has done 180 inspections this year," he said. "Show me a hotel or restaurant under the same level of restrictions and monitoring. It's incredible."

Eva Hughes, vice president of the association, said that as a small animal vet, Xanthos was "definitely not an authority" on horses. Hughes added she would be happy to have an equine veterinarian or ABC News evaluate her horses, which are housed at Clinton Park Stables, on West 52nd Street.

To Xanthos' claim that the horses were being overworked during the busy holiday season, Hughes said only weekends were unusually busy, weather permitting, meaning "only six busy weekends a year, between Thanksgiving and New Year's."

Malone said operators -- many of whom have grown up and worked with horses their whole lives -- embody an ethic that clashes with the image their critics promote.

"Operating a carriage is a life choice more than a livelihood," he said. "It's not what we do -- it's who we are."

An Equine Vet Weighs In

Rose Nolen-Walston, an assistant professor of equine medicine at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, said "more horses hurt themselves playing in the field than on city streets."

"New York is not an intrinsically dangerous place for a horse to be as long as appropriate precautions are taken," she said.

The "big caveat" she appends is, "Regulations are only as good as their enforcement."

She said she could not evaluate New York's enforcement but wondered how well-funded it was given the economy. "It's a tricky time for budgets, isn't it?" she said.

As to horses' "psychological well-being" and whether they "enjoy" pulling carriages, Nolen-Walston said while it's "impossible to know exactly what they're thinking ... it's almost impossible to make a horse do something it doesn't want to do."

Many horses in the United States work for humans and have high standards of living, and New York City isn't necessarily an exception, she said.

"Would it be ideal if the carriage horses were turned out every night? Sure, but there's no evidence to suggest it's inhumane for horses to work in urban environments if they have periodic breaks," she said.

Five weeks a year -- the New York City requirement -- seemed good, she said, adding no one had researched what the ideal schedule for urban horses would be.

New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg has been a strong defender of New York carriage rides, saying horses are well cared for -- and many might not be alive if they didn't pull carriages.

Elaine McMinn, owner-operator of Greyhorse Carriage Company, in Allentown, N.J., said this was "probably" true: "[Carriage operators] are among the only people buying horses nowadays."

Nolen-Walston wrote in an email: "There is a huge problem with unwanted horses in this country right now." Giving New York carriage horses a "fair working life and [treating them] humanely is a small, but useful step in preventing more horses from joining this number."

Nolen-Walston, seeking to put the debate in historical perspective, said horses have been working with humans for hundreds of years. The exhaust fumes and concrete of modern cities that urban carriage horses contend with are more than balanced out by changes in us, specifically the rise of the animal welfare movement, she said.

"A hundred years ago, nobody cared about horses' [collective] well-being," but now there are detailed regulations -- however well they're enforced -- safeguarding it, she said.

"Activists have had a huge role in this and should be commended," she said.