

Off-Track Thoroughbreds



Liberated from illegal butcher, a horse inspires



Tied to a tree in the Florida Everglades, the Thoroughbred with the fortuitous name Freedom's Flight awaited his fate: death in an illegal slaughterhouse.

He stood on a shattered leg that had snapped in April 2008 at a Gulf stream Park race, as his face swelled grotesquely and oozed mucus from Strangles, a contagious disease so severe he was nearly choking with it.

Awaiting the thrust of a knife deep into his heart, like the horse in line just ahead, the great-great grandson of Secretariat was far from the eyes of the public, and adoring horse fans. He was in the C-9 Basin in south Florida, only 20 miles from Miami.

And just when it seemed life was really going to end this way, the rattling sound of tires on gravel heralded the arrival of help.

The Miami-Dade Police Department along with the SPCA had arrived on scene to the chaos of death and terrified horses. And it didn't take the poor horse long to choose a friend among his saviors.

Richard "Kudo" Couto, founder and lead investigator for the Animal Recovery Mission (ARM), was a SPCA volunteer when he accompanied an associate to the killing ground of the C-9 Basin. As the horror of the place washed over Couto, he rushed to the side of the meek ex-racehorse, wanting to comfort him, seeking to reassure him that help had arrived: Freedom's Flight would not die this day.

“The second I saw Freedom’s Flight, I took a picture of him. I couldn’t believe it. Then I went up to him and he put his head and full weight onto me,” Couto says. “Before I started volunteering with the SPCA, I’d vowed I would not adopt a horse, and I certainly never planned to adopt a horse with a broken leg.”

However, as he assisted the others in helping the sick, emaciated gelding get onto a rescue trailer, his thoughts were already forming. And when he later visited the animal in quarantine within a stone’s throw of other illegal slaughterhouses, Couto made a new vow.

“Standing in a horse pasture at the SPCA, I could hear the screams of animals at the illegal slaughterhouse across the street,” he says. “While I listened to the animals being tortured on 97th Avenue, where there were 18 illegal farms at the time, I vowed to this horse that I would seek redemption for him. One day, I told him, I’ll do it.”



Freedom’s Flight was the next in line to die in an illegal slaughterhouse in the C-9 Basin of Florida when the SPCA, the Miami-Dade Police arrived.

He adopted Freedom’s Flight from the SPCA and visited him regularly in his quarantine field. It was hot that summer, as he hosed off the sweat and flies, and promised to avenge the suffering animal.

After five weeks, the chestnut had overcome his contagious disease and was placed in a quiet barn far from the cries of dying animals. And for nine long months he rehabbed in his stall to give his shattered leg an opportunity to fuse.

“Because so much time had passed from the time he broke it, surgery was no longer an option,” says Couto, explaining that after Freedom’s Flight broke down at the racetrack, he changed hands a few times, and never had the leg properly set.

After about a year-and-a-half, Couto was able to mount Freedom’s Flight bareback, and almost simultaneously mounted a powerful campaign that has since made significant inroads to shutter illegal slaughterhouses.

Through many undercover investigations, Couto and ARM has documented abuses, partnered with law enforcement, and helped change the fate for so many slaughter-bound horses.

Among their growing list of accomplishments, ARM has played a role in shutting down a long list of slaughterhouses through collaborations with law enforcement, including the Florida State’s Attorney’s Office.

ARM’s work has been widely chronicled in the local and national press stories, which have aired on many major networks, including a report by NBC.

So much has gone on since Couto first met Freedom’s Flight in the desolate backwater of the Florida Everglades. Both have fought long and hard to right a wrong.

Freedom’s Flight eventually returned to health, and is now resplendent in his pasture. *“People are amazed how fast he goes through the pasture,”* he says. *“Sometimes I ride him, but it’s always a light ride, bareback, with rope on his halter. I think we have a certain trust in each other.”*



