

Hernando sheriff slow to act against illegal horse slaughter ring, nonprofit says

In Brooksville, animal activists uncovered widespread abuse and illegal slaughter. Local law enforcement has made one arrest.



Funny Biz, a retired racehorse, was illegally slain at a Brooksville slaughterhouse and sold, according to South Florida nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission. Illegally slaughtering a thoroughbred racehorse is considered a second-degree felony under Florida law and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison. [Courtesy of Animal Recovery Mission]

By **Jack Prator** *Times staff*

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Richard Couto watched as men corralled Funny Biz and tied the retired racehorse to a tree. One man raised a rifle, took aim and shot it point-blank in the head.

The horse, a descendant of Triple Crown winner Secretariat, didn't die immediately. It convulsed on the ground until another man finished the job. He took a butcher's knife and plunged it over and over into the animal's heart. Still clutching the bloodied blade, the man turned to Couto and a group huddled behind him, who broke into laughter.

Then they got to work chopping up the carcass with electric handsaws and bagging it for sale.

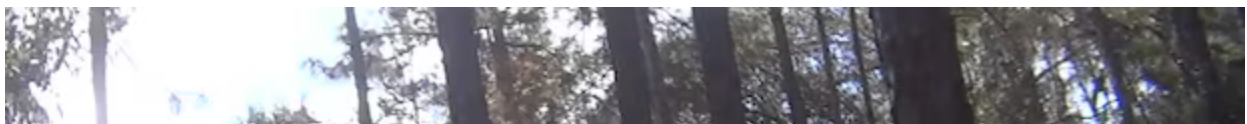
Video captured of Funny Biz's slaying is just one glimpse inside an illegal slaughterhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac in rural Brooksville, where farm animals are abused, killed and sold in unmarked bags to be distributed to food stands and butcher shops around Florida, Couto said.

A spokesperson for the Hernando County Sheriff's Office said Wednesday that the agency is investigating the business.

But Couto, who had been undercover inside the farm for nearly two years, buying meat from the unlicensed business and earning the owners' trust, said the agency isn't acting fast enough.

In December, he shared all that he had found with the sheriff's office — hidden camera footage, illegally sold meat and recorded conversations with the business owners. Deputies have made one arrest at the site so far, records show. Couto says the slaughterhouse is still operating.

Couto founded Miami Beach-based nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission in 2009. Since then, he said the organization has uncovered more than 200 illegal slaughterhouses across the state. Under Florida law, horse meat marked for human consumption is illegal.





A screenshot from hidden camera footage taken by Richard Couto, founder of nonprofit Animal Recovery Mission, shows a man take aim at Funny Biz. The racehorse was illegally slaughtered and sold at a Brooksville slaughterhouse, Couto said. [Courtesy of Animal Recovery Mission]

He was first tipped off about the Brooksville farm by an advertisement on Craigslist selling horse meat “by the pound,” Couto said. When he and other undercover investigators arrived to check out the slaughterhouse, Couto said they found obvious wrongdoing.

“They were walking up to pigs and beating them with two-by-fours. They were stabbing them to death. These are clear felonies in the state of Florida and everywhere in the United States,” he said.

Wearing a hidden camera, Couto documented thousands of pounds of meat loaded into unrefrigerated pickup trucks to be sold around the state.

“They say, ‘Today we’re going to downtown Tampa, where we’re going to a fruit stand. Today, we’re going to a small little cantina or butcher shop,’” he said.

“Other days they’re going to Ocala. Other days they’re going to Miami. Other days they’re going to downtown Orlando.”

Couto was shocked to find the business had operated for years without much discretion — neighbors and property owners had been complaining about the facility to law enforcement long before Couto caught wind of the animal slayings, he said.

He said neighbors have reported “rivers of blood” seeping onto their land. Walkers and cyclists on the Suncoast Trail, next to the property, have called Hernando deputies to report the abuse, according to Couto.

“I’ve been at the slaughter area as they’re chopping up an animal alive and people are yelling at me as they’re walking their children and their animals on the path, wondering what in the world is going on,” Couto said.

On July 6, Hernando deputies first made an arrest on the property, records show. Juan Alberto Hernandez Cruz, 54, was charged with animal cruelty, a misdemeanor.

Illegally slaughtering a thoroughbred racehorse, such as Funny Biz, is considered a second-degree felony under Florida law and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison.

“The two owners were not arrested. They’re on the farm today,” Couto said. “That is unconscionable. It should be illegal.”

A spokesperson with the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office declined to comment on the case, citing an active investigation.

“You won’t understand until you read the entire report, which I can’t release right now because we’re still working with the state attorney,” said Denise Moloney, a spokesperson with the agency.

Hernando state attorney Bill Gladson said in a news conference Thursday morning that prosecutors are working hard on the case.

He said investigations like these take time and expressed frustration with Couto’s methods, adding “the laws have to be followed.”

“That’s not effective. It doesn’t work for prosecution,” Gladson said of Couto’s undercover operation.

Speaking to reporters during the conference, Hernando sheriff Al Nienhuis echoed

the state attorney's concerns.

“Ordering up a horse to be killed and watching it get killed? We’re not going to do that,” he said.

Nienhuis referred to Couto as a “so-called animal activist,” who is “difficult to deal with.” He said his agency won’t bow to “political pressure” to prosecute the case.

Authorities have not yet been able to prove whether Funny Biz was killed in Hernando County, which has hindered prosecution, the sheriff said. Nienhuis added that he believes the horse and the men who slaughtered it arrived from Hillsborough.

“I love animals and I don’t want to see an animal abused any more than anybody else,” Nienhuis said. “And I’m certainly not going to allow that to occur in the course of our investigation.”

Couto said he will keep fighting to bring the animals held at the Brooksville slaughterhouse to a sanctuary owned by his nonprofit.

Editor’s note: Animal Recovery Mission is not licensed by the state of Florida to buy illegal meat to be used as evidence. A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that it was.

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