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**Tyranny of the Status Quo**

When famous economist Milton Friedman coauthored the book, Tyranny of the Status Quo, it’s likely that the thoroughbred industry was not foremost in his mind. But, is he had focused his prodigious intellect on thoroughbred breeding and racing, there’s little doubt but that he would have recognized the applicability of the concept to racing and breeding.

Friedman brought increased attention to the “Tyranny of the Status Quo” when it was addressed in a 1980’s PBS series by the same name*.* The PBS programs consisted of a series of discussions in which Friedman moderated debates that discussed vested interests and the tyranny of the status quo in American economics and politics.

The tyranny of the status quo is a phenomenon that presents itself in many different contexts. However, the commonly accepted understanding of what is “the tyranny of the status quo” is that it is the failure, when making a policy decision, to focus on the fairest and most efficient ways to do things, preferring instead to give too much consideration to the current way things are done. This phenomenon was an issue, and continues to be an issue, when debating the subsidization of higher education, the agricultural industry, and many other topics. If you watch Friedman’s PBS series, you will see these education and agriculture under the spotlight. The panel engages in an especially fiery debate over the subsidization of higher education as the argument of the opposition centers around the tyranny of the status quo being the reason that any decrease in funding to education correlates directly with a reduced quality of education. The argument is that those in favor of subsidizing education may be overlooking alternatives that could maintain the quality of education while reducing the expenses. Friedman argued that these alternatives were not given appropriate consideration because of the narrow viewpoint of those who fall victim to the tyranny of the status quo.

Transitioning the discussion of the tyranny of the status quo from the political sphere to the thoroughbred industry, this write-up will discuss two topics in which this phenomenon is applicable. In a broad sense, the “governing body” of the thoroughbred industry, the Jockey Club, is a victim of the tyranny of the status quo. This club-like institution appears to restrict its membership to those with a vested interest in the industry, and though it champions many worthy causes, it frequently suffers from a very narrow field of vision when industry changes are proposed.

One example is that of artificial insemination. The Jockey Club maintains that in order to be a registered thoroughbred, the foal must have been bred via live breeding (and thus not having been bred via artificial insemination). The Jockey Club seems more interested in maintaining the status quo, when it seems highly likely that it would be more cost effective and efficient, and diseases would be less likely to be transmitted, if AI were allowed. An argument made before DNA testing that the integrity of the stud book was at stake no longer holds water since DNA testing assures that each foal will have its parentage verified. Nevertheless, the Jockey Club has decided that they do not want to change tradition.

Another example of the tyranny of the status quo is the opposition by many in the thoroughbred industry to any proposed calendar change for triple crown races. Trainers in this century have adopted training methods that have horses taking much longer rest periods between races than was the case in the past. If these new training methods are logical, would it not also be logical to allow for more time between Triple Crown races. There is something to be said for requiring triple crown winners to be subject to a rigorous test of their abilities, but would a change to a less-closely spaced format, especially in light of modern training methods, not provide a test of champions under more reasonable terms? However, most all changes that have been proposed regarding such races have had little to no success primarily on the grounds that it would break tradition.

The tyranny of the status quo often deters the implementation of more efficient ways of conducting business. While the annual foal crop of thoroughbreds in Kentucky has been on the decline, the introduction of artificial insemination has the potential to lower costs and increase availability to proven sires, thus perhaps helping to turn around a trend toward smaller foal crops that has ominous implications for the industry. However, artificial insemination does not seem to be a likely solution at least in the short run because it goes against tradition and challenges vested interests. We also know that a Triple Crown winner would help restore the popularity of the racing industry, yet pushing back the dates of any one of the three legs is strongly contested by many in the name of tradition.[[1]](#footnote-1) The racing industry is going through some trying times, and combating the phenomenon known as the “tyranny of the status quo” will be a major hurdle for the industry going forward.

1. Professor’s (R L Losey) note. The “traditions” of race spacing (and race distances) for the triple crown defended by many are more recent than some traditionalists realize. Sir Barton, the first triple crown winner, won the Preakness Stakes **four days** after the Kentucky Derby, then went on to win the Belmont Stakes at its then “traditional” distance of a mile and three-eighths. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)