

FLORIDA

IN-DEPTH: Florida Horse Owners Fear Black Market Slaughterers Who Come in the Night for Highly-Prized Meat

Equestrians in the state worry a lack cooperation between law enforcement agencies is allowing the barbaric crime spree to continue unchecked



Mari Pritchard enjoys a ride on a Florida beach with her 9-year-old mare, Frosty. (Courtesy of Mari Pritchard)

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By Natasha Holt

July 23, 2023 Updated: July 23, 2023





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Ocala, Fla.—Mari Pritchard’s voice still trembles as she speaks of the last time she saw her beloved horse, Frosty. She had been terrified by reports on social media of horses being killed in the night in Florida, apparently for meat.

“But it won’t happen here,” she’d reassured herself, after confiding to her mother about her fears.

Then on a horrible day in May 2020, she answered a call at work and heard despair in the voice of a friend who’d been caring for Frosty.



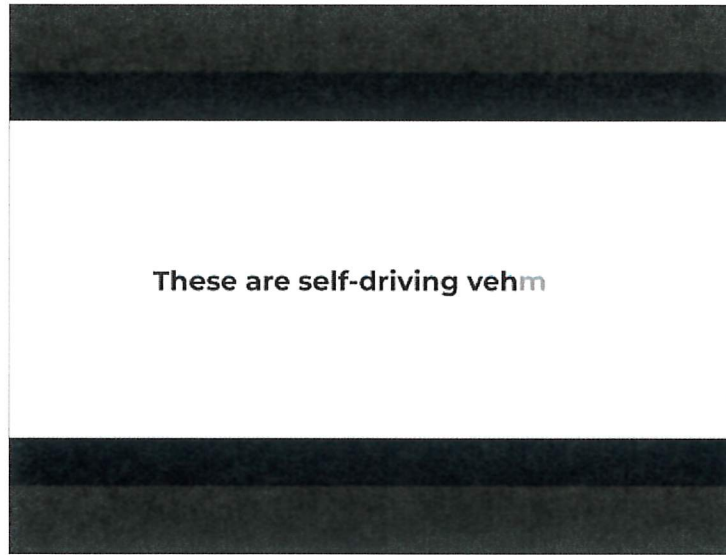
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Instantly, she knew.

Gentle, treat-loving Frosty—her companion on long, lazy trail rides—was dead.



When officers from the Marion County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) arrived at the friend's farm, they found that the parts of Frosty's body that could be sold for meat had been removed and taken.

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Only horror was left behind.



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Horse treats were spilled near an opening that had been cut in the fence of Frosty's paddock, investigators discovered. The butchers had apparently used them to lure the 9-year-old mare to her death.



Frosty, a 9-year-old American Quarter Horse mare. (Courtesy of Mari Pritchard)

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“They betrayed her,” Ms. Pritchard told The Epoch Times, her lips quivering, eyes filling with tears.

It took her a year to be able to speak of the tragedy.

Now, she’s sharing her painful story in the hopes of helping others avoid a similar loss.

Unrelenting Fear

A white portable refrigerator unit floating on a lake. The unit is rectangular with a large front grille and a handle on top. The background shows a forested shoreline and mountains under a blue sky. In the top right corner of the image, there are small icons for play and close. Below the image, there is a dark blue banner with white text and a white circle containing a right-pointing arrow.

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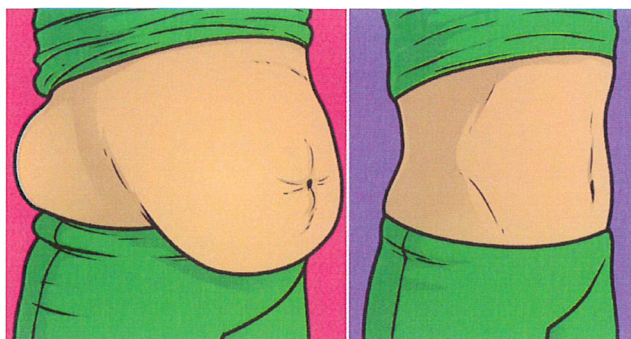
Consumer Expert Review

After years of living in fear of the black-market butchers, horse owners across Florida are celebrating a recent step toward reining in the problem.

A Manatee County man was convicted in May and sentenced to 10 years in prison, 10 years probation, and \$250,000 in restitution for butchering a gelding named Halo in 2019.

Horse enthusiasts around Florida see his punishment as a victory.

But it's bittersweet, they say, because the threat remains.



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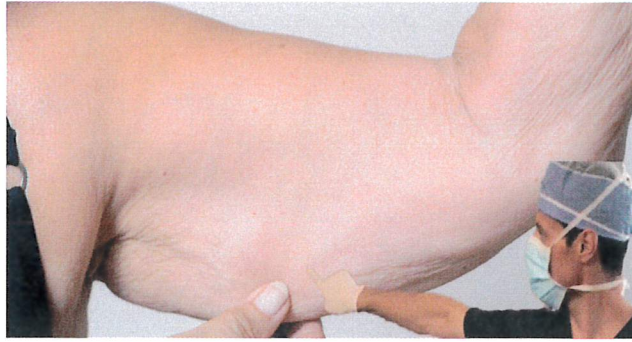
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Many told The Epoch Times of how they live in fear of tragedy striking in the night in their own backyard stables and paddocks.

And they're frustrated by what they see as a lack of coordination among law enforcement agencies to investigate and stop the barbaric practice.

Though horse slaughter is illegal in Florida, there isn't a statewide cooperative effort to investigate those crimes, multiple law enforcement agencies confirmed to The Epoch Times.

And, law enforcement agency spokespersons admitted, it's unclear just how many horses have been stolen and butchered in the night.



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Horse Capital of the World

Ocala in central Florida has long been known as the Horse Capital of the World.

Now, the state sports an unfortunate new title as the epicenter of the illegal horse-meat market in the country, said Richard Cuoto, founder of Animal Recovery Mission. His group is investigating the rash of horse killings.

A big part of the problem, he said, is that the state has a large population of ethnic groups who consume horse meat. Law enforcement agencies confirmed that some Cubans seek it out as a delicacy and believe it may have medicinal properties.



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“The horse meat industry has always been lucrative, profitable, and in high demand in Florida. But now, we’re seeing people become a little bit more brazen,” Mr. Cuoto said.

In the past, the meat mostly came from hidden slaughterhouses scattered around the state, he said.

People involved in the black market trade masqueraded as horse lovers. They purchased low-cost animals advertised for sale on Facebook, Craigslist.com, and other platforms. Then, they take them home for the slaughter, he said.

Lately, their techniques have targeted animals not offered for sale, Mr. Cuoto said.



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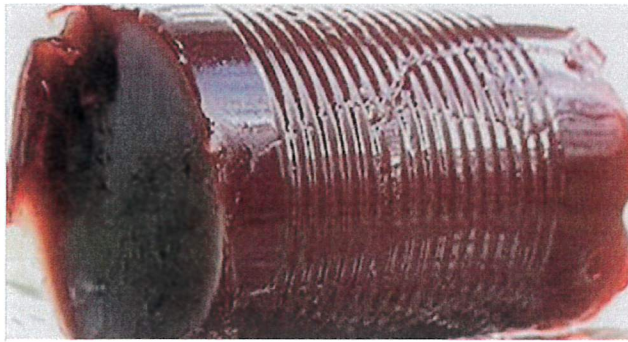
“Over the past few years, they’ve been breaking onto properties and killing pet horses.”



A statue of the famous war horse, Staff Sgt. Reckless, is displayed near the Grand Arena at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala, Fla., on June 12, 2021. (Nanette Holt/The Epoch Times)

Now, with every report of a theft or slaughter, horse owners' fears are being reignited.

Many commiserate in horse-related Facebook groups for Floridians about spending sleepless nights wondering if their beloved animals are safe outside in the dark. They post about their worries that they'll wake up to find a pet's carcass stripped of its meat.



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It's a reasonable fear, law enforcement agencies confirm.

The MCSO has handled three horse slaughter cases in the past five years, said Valerie Strong, a public information officer for the agency. She did not respond to questions about whether investigations into the killings were ongoing.

The Miami-Dade Police Department Agriculture Patrol Division has handled at least 14 cases since 2020, said Sgt. Frank Farinas. As of now, those cases are all sitting cold.

But the department does take the issue seriously, he said.



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In his area of the state, it's more common for people to slaughter horses for their own consumption on their own property, rather than steal others' animals, he said.

It's still illegal.

But a lack of evidence makes it more difficult to discover and investigate those crimes, he said.

A Difficult Crime to Track



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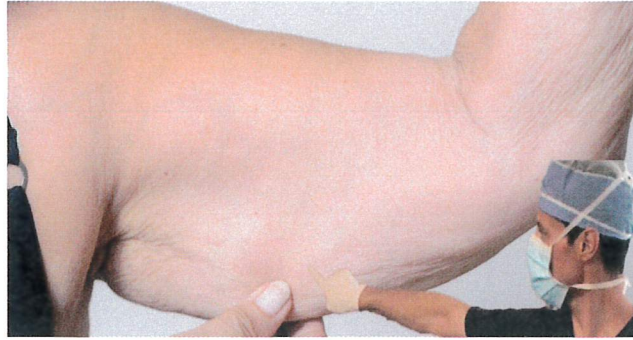
Most cases of slaughter in south Florida are discovered only when body parts are found discarded on the side of the road, he said.

So, cases of slaughter that don't have evidence stay under the radar of law enforcement, leaving officers and horse owners to question how many cases are actually occurring across the state, Sgt. Farinas said.

"They are killed in very rural areas where there are no cameras, no neighbors, no [human] victims, and no witnesses," he said.

"It's not like a robbery that occurred at a gas station," Sgt. Farinas explained. "It's not like a chase going down the road. It's not a fight that was posted on social media. These are crimes occurring on private property and [behind]

high fences, sometimes within structures.



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“If you just tell me that a person is killing horses, I can’t just barge onto that property and look around to see if I find evidence of that.”

Without a warrant, which demands probable cause, there’s no way for officers to investigate a tip.

If someone knows about a slaughter operation and informs the police, the informant often is too afraid of retaliation to help in the investigation and prosecution, he said.



Two Arabian horses graze in a pasture at a home in Alachua, Fla., on May 18, 2023. (Nanette Holt/The Epoch Times)

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“They’ll say ‘If they find out I’m talking, they’ll kill me,’ or ‘I don’t want them to

know who my family is.”

In one case, a horse was slaughtered as an act of retaliation, Sgt. Farinas said.

A slaughterer and his horse-owning friend had a falling out. Afterward, the horse owner discovered his horse missing. The horse’s body was later found in the canal behind his home.

“He was very reluctant to talk to us or give us any information,” Sgt. Farinas said. “It was obvious that it was a retaliation case.”



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Undercover Investigation

Without the help of informants, agencies have turned to other help. That’s where Mr. Cuoto and his helpers at Animal Recovery Mission come in. Several agencies deferred to him when asked about the issue.

There are hundreds of illegal slaughterhouses operating throughout Florida, Mr. Cuoto said.

And the illegal killing of horses for meat is much more widespread than most people think.



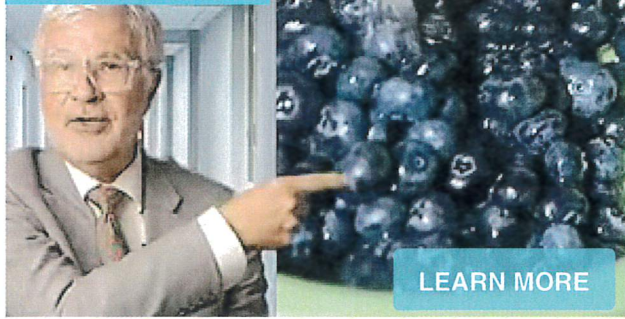
He aims to do whatever it takes to bring it to a halt.

As an animal enthusiast with a hatred for cruelty, he started his non-profit to work undercover to expose and help stop abuse—including the illegal horse-meat trade—across the United States and around the world.

Since 2009, his team has helped law enforcement agencies shut down about 200 illegal horse-slaughter operations in Florida, he said. His work has inspired profiles in international media, such as National Geographic and in Bloomberg News.

By his estimate, there are still about 500 horse-butcher operations left in the state of Florida, he said. Some kill 20-30 horses per week, and undercover investigations are underway in an effort to bring them to a close, he said.

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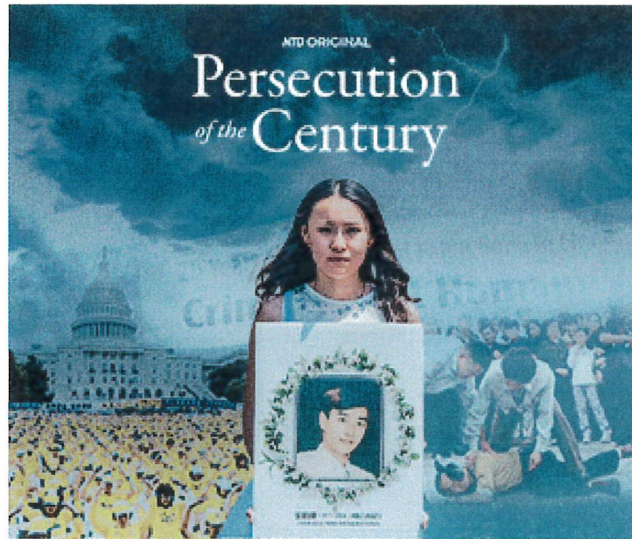
He and the law enforcement agencies involved declined to discuss details of their operations, to avoid tipping off suspects.



A competitor in a show-jumping competition guides his horse around the course in Ocala, Fla., on March 8, 2020. (Nanette Holt/The Epoch Times)

The biggest market for horse meat is in Miami, Mr. Cuoto said. That's because Cubans, many of whom live in the area, are especially fond of what they've deemed a delicacy, he said.

Sgt. Farinas agreed, saying that horse meat is especially desirable to older Cubans who emigrated to the United States.



Many buyers believe the meat has magical benefits, with the ability to cure blood disorders, help ease side effects of chemotherapy, and strengthen the body in other ways, Sgt. Farinas said.

That, Mr. Cuoto agreed, is why people are so desperate to get their hands on horse meat—desperate enough to kill the animals for it.

What Buyers Don't Know

What buyers don't know is that their black market horse meat could be deadly.



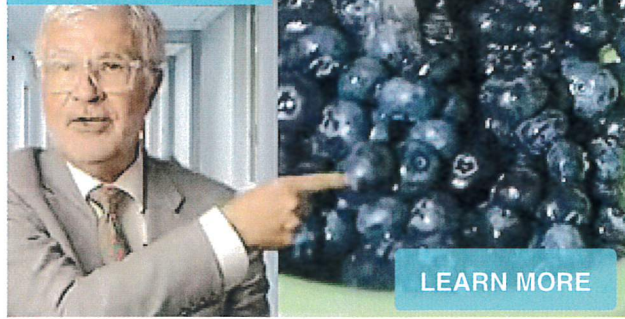
Horse owners on Facebook groups concerned about slaughter often remark how many medications their horses consume, medications that could be passed through the meat to humans and pose a great risk to human health.

And because the animals are killed in such unsanitary areas, the meat can be dangerous to consume, Sgt. Farinas said.

Labs that have tested meat left behind in these cases have found contaminants such as glass, he said.

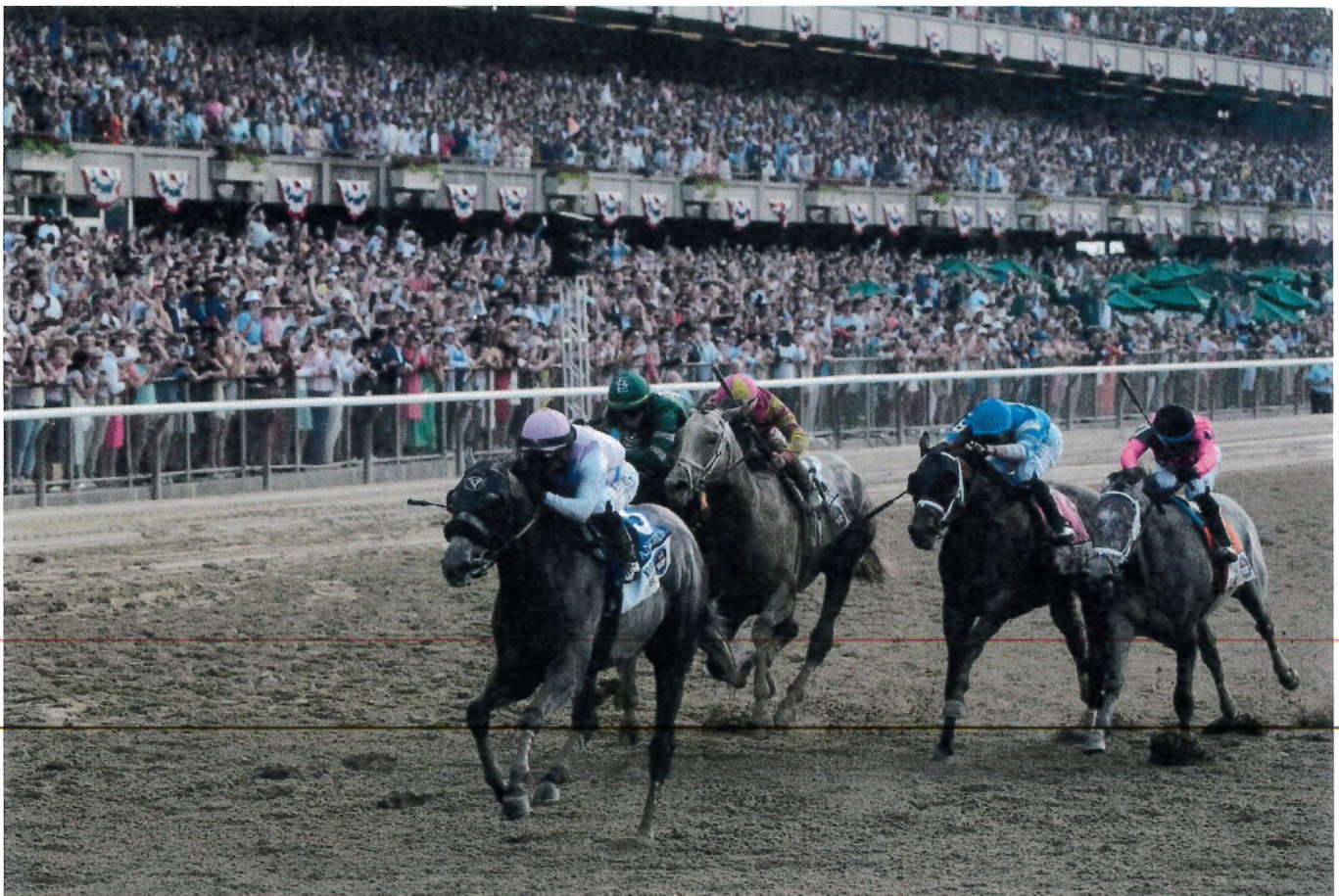
“They’ll sell this meat saying ‘If you have cancer, this might help you,’ or ‘If you have low blood cells, this might help you,’” Sgt. Farinas said. “You’re pretty much poisoning yourself at that point.”

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Thoroughbred racehorse Arcangelo, with jockey Javier Castellano aboard, crosses the finish line to win the 155th running of the Belmont Stakes horse race at Belmont Park in Elmont, N.Y., on June 10, 2023. (Seth Wenig/AP)

Meat from Thoroughbred racehorses, marked with lip tattoos that signify they've had a racing career, is an extra delicacy, Mr. Cuoto said.

Some believe the exceptional power and beauty of that breed's meat transfers

to the human body, he said. Buyers are willing to pay up to \$40 per pound for it, he said.

‘As Far as the Evidence Leads’



Before 2011, horse meat was sold in some grocery stores and butcher shops in Florida, Mr. Cuoto said. But that year, lawmakers passed state statute 828.125 to outlaw the practice.

Mr. Cuoto said he helped write the law that delivers tough punishment for even just the possession of horse meat. The crime carries a minimum mandatory penalty of one year in state prison and a \$3,500 fine.


“So, it’s actually more damning getting caught now with horse meat on your fork than it is [to possess] heroin in the State of Florida,” Mr. Cuoto said.

That’s when the slaughter of horses was forced underground, he said. State law makes it a second-degree felony to kill or commit aggravated abuse of a horse.

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A horse owner with an adult Arabian horse allows him to sniff noses with another horse owner's foal as the two take their animals out of their stalls for a walk during a competition at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala, Fla., on May 6, 2023. (Nanette Holt/The Epoch Times)

Buyers must know the seller to get horse meat, Mr. Cuoto said. It's often

delivered to a buyer's door, much like illegal drugs are sold, he said.

He's frustrated, too, by what he sees as a lack of enforcement of the law.

"Law enforcement isn't taking these cases," he said. "Prosecutors are pleading the cases out very quickly, and judges aren't taking this seriously. The laws are there. They need to be utilized by law enforcement and by officials."



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A Manatee County Sheriff's Office spokesman takes some issue with that characterization.

"You know, there are some crimes that are difficult to investigate," said Randy Warren, a spokesman for the agency.

"It doesn't mean that they don't care. It doesn't mean that they're not interested in pursuing it. It's just you can only go so far. You know, we often say, 'Well, we'll go as far as the evidence leads.'"

Losing War



Megan Zwaans knows the pain of losing a horse she considered to be a friend.

War, a regal Thoroughbred, had been rescued after a career as a racehorse. He was taken in by a friend's South Florida non-profit after a fracture in his leg required extensive rehabilitation.



Megan Zwaans shares a hug with racehorse-in-need-of-rescue, War, as she considers him for intake at a South Florida non-profit after a career-ending leg injury. (Courtesy of Megan Zwaans)

“But you could tell that he wanted to live. He wanted a chance,” Ms. Zwaans said.



Eventually, War found a loving, forever home with a family that adopted him.

He started a new life quietly carrying his rider on trails. He summered in New York and wintered in Florida, living the life of a pampered snowbird.

His transformation warmed her heart.

“He lived an amazing lifestyle with people who really cared about him,” Ms. Zwaans said.



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But in February, horror struck in a moonlit Miami horse pasture. Then came the phone call that delivered the last update about War and his pasture-mate,

Sammie.

“I got a call that he was missing and when she told me he was in Miami, not New York, I knew that he was stolen for his meat, just because of that area,” Ms. Zwaans said.

Her heart sank.

Late into the night, searchers raced through the area on a fleet of ATVs, peering into canals and wooded areas, looking for any sign of the two missing pets. Then, they made a gruesome discovery.

Body parts, everywhere. The memory seems too awful to be real.

“They took everything they could from that horse’s body to sell everything,” Ms. Zwaans said.

The people who stole War and Sammie clearly knew what they were doing, she said.

“All the cameras were avoided when they cut the fence,” she said. “So they knew exactly where to go without being detected.”



Meg Weinberger, horse rescue operator and Republican candidate for Florida House District 94. (Courtesy of Meg Weinberger)

Meg Weinberger runs Rescue Life, the nonprofit that took in War and found him a home. She helped search for him when he was reported missing.

The tragedy is part of what prompted her to run for Florida State House District 94.

“I have dedicated my life to helping others,” Ms. Weinberger said. “But I can only do so much from the sidelines.



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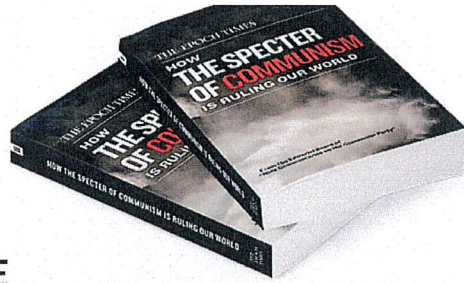
“This next step will enable me to help protect those who can’t protect themselves.”

If she wins a seat in the Florida Legislature, she hopes to spark the creation of a statewide task force to investigate the crime of slaughtering Frosty, War, Sammie, and others.

In her city of West Palm Beach, the remains of a horse were found on June 11 floating in a canal. Covered in vegetation and flies, police recorded the findings but no further action has been taken, a public records request by The Epoch Times revealed.

Justice for Halo

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HOW THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM IS RULING OUR WORLD

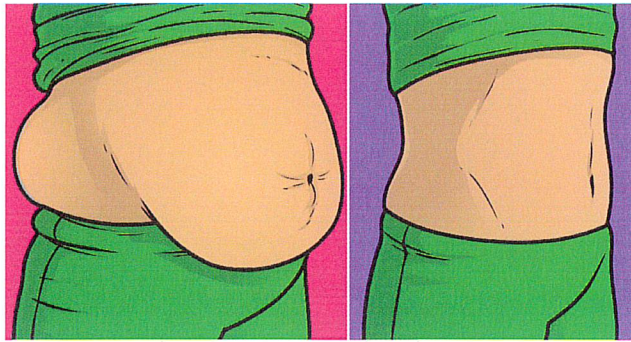
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“I think it’s a big concern for a lot of horse owners, especially those with quick access to highways, road fronts, and gates that butt up to roads,” Florida equestrian Shelly Stephens told The Epoch Times through a social-media exchange.

“Then, there’s the concern that not enough is being done by law enforcement to deter it.”

Stephens is one of more than 7,400 Facebook users who share information on a private group called Keeping Florida Horses Safe/Suspicious Activity.

Group members frequently post about unfamiliar vehicles or people they’ve spotted lurking near horse properties. They also report horses newly discovered missing and share about safety measures that could thwart would-be slaughterers.



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The Facebook group also organizes enthusiasts' efforts to lobby for harsh sentences for convicted horse slaughterers.

When they suspected a lenient sentence would be handed down on the Manatee County conviction in May, they bombarded the state attorney's office with letters, emails, and phone calls, pleading for efforts to pursue the maximum penalty.

On May 30, they rejoiced when Eladio Garcia Gasca was sentenced to prison time, probation, and the requirement to pay hefty restitution. The group's Facebook page was filled with posts of relief almost four years after the crime.

"The DA clearly mentioned that the thousands of emails, calls, and letters that came throughout this almost three-year court proceeding was amazing," the group administrator wrote to members, who posted about their gratitude that Halo's killer had received "justice."



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That case gained more attention than others because of clear security-video footage showing Mr. Gasca in the barn before he stole a 10-year-old gelding from his cozy stall on a December night in 2019.

Mr. Gasca led the placid animal across the street and slaughtered him behind bushes.

“Good video evidence is important,” said Mr. Warren of the Manatee County Sheriff’s Office. “It only improves the chance that the person is caught.”

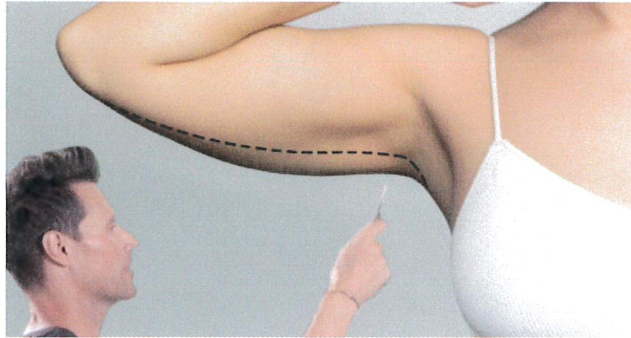
Video surveillance footage originally was posted by the Orlando Police Department in the hopes of locating a suspect who led a horse from the back of a horse trailer in a business parking lot at 3:15 a.m. on June 22.

The video, now widely shared on social media, shows a person on a bicycle unloading a black-and-white Paso Fino from the back of a parked livestock trailer, then leading the docilely following animal away.

Cameras are just part of what horse owners are adding to their properties, as they can afford to in the hopes of protecting their animals.

“When I lived in Wimauma, two horses were taken and slaughtered within two miles of my home,” Tamara Gear-Lewis told The Epoch Times.

Now, she's building a farm further north in High Springs and she's taking extra precautions to keep her horses safe.



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She's added two layers of fencing around her pastures, topping one with a wire that will deliver a stinging electric shock to any animal or person who touches it. She also acquired a guard dog. She'll install cameras soon.

Her barn is just 30 feet from the house. From almost every room in her house, she can look out and see her horses. And she never leaves her horses in the pasture when she's gone.

"We've done everything we can possibly think of to prevent this," she said. "I can't imagine losing one."

Suzanne Holton owns the Bits & Spurs Tack store in Newberry and sells horse equipment to fellow enthusiasts. Customers frequently tell her about their worries about horse slaughter.

"We're all concerned," Ms. Holton said.

She doesn't worry as much as some of her friends, she said, because her county of Alachua hasn't had a recorded case. But she stays up-to-date on where horses are reported as stolen, where horse bodies are found, and what sentences horse slaughterers receive.

Law enforcement agencies are urging horse owners to install cameras and keep barns and pastures locked. But staying aware of who is potentially watching your horses and property also is important.

“If you notice any suspicious activities, such as unfamiliar people taking an unusual interest in your horses or unusual trailers parked nearby, report them to local law enforcement immediately,” said Phil Martello, assistant chief communications officer at the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office.

“Provide as much detail as possible, including descriptions of individuals and vehicles involved.”

Happy Ending

Ms. Pritchard thought about selling her rural property after her constant companion was gone.

She’d been readying it to become Frosty’s home when the unthinkable happened. After that, she didn’t have a use for the acreage anymore.

Eventually, she followed friends’ advice and pushed ahead on her fencing project anyway. It made her feel like she was doing something positive again.

“I was no longer sitting around with depression and not knowing how I was going to get out of it,” she said.

After a long year and many tears, she finally felt ready to open her heart to a horse again.

She was given a copper-colored retiree named Dream. And she used her savings to buy a tall, muscular, grey gelding from racing stock named JJ.

The two have become the joy of her life.

Mari Pritchard embraces her horses Dream (left) and J.J. at a barnyard paddock at her home in Ocala, Fla., on June 13, 2023. (Natasha Holt for The Epoch Times)

“I was able to get back to riding but at the same time I’ve become more paranoid,” she said, stroking J.J.’s velvety nose. “I’ve got cameras with alarms everywhere. And I’m putting up more because I just don’t feel safe.”

As she showed a reporter around the barn and pasture, her phone frequently sent out a shrill alarm, alerting her to motion detected, possible “intruders” near her animals.

“Any hour of the night, if someone gets near that fence, it’s going to wake me up with a siren alarm,” she said.

“People tell me that I’m overreacting, that I’m overly paranoid and it’s not going to happen here. And my thoughts are ‘How do you know?’

“I didn’t think it would happen to me and here I am.”

Ms. Pritchard closely watches the Facebook groups dedicated to sharing information about where horses have disappeared.

Sometimes, the pets are found unharmed. Other reports end with tragic details. Some horse owners never get an answer.

“I’m obsessed,” she said, gesturing to a camera that alerts her when anyone approaches her horses’ home. “I’m not the same person I used to be.

“But now my alarm’s on the inside, in my gut—it makes it so I don’t sleep well at night. And I sit and my mind goes 100 miles an hour.”

Then, a smile spread across her face as she stood between her two horses. She reached up to embrace both at once.

“They’re worth it,” she said. “They’re family.”

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