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Cobb Business: Horse rescuers
Farm owners work to save thoroughbreds from slaughter

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Every year thousands of thoroughbred horses are foaled, but only a small fraction are destined to become known on Kentucky Derby day.

The larger world of thoroughbred racing saunters on relatively undetected by the general public, in a tiered system of lesser-known tracks. As long as they win, the horses stay on. But when they begin to lose their edge, are injured or start showing age, these carefully bred athletes are at risk. They can become caught on a downward spiral leading to bargain basement auctions, and end in ignominious deaths in slaughterhouses.

Thoroughbred rescue organizations aim to help the most vulnerable — the horses that have reached the end of their "useful" lives and are at risk for slaughter.

Bits & Bytes Farm in Canton has a different mission. Owners Elizabeth Wood and Barry Zuber focus on taking horses from the tracks before they've hit the skids.

"Rescue groups work at the low-end tracks, where the horses have run until they can't run anymore, and most are worn out," said Wood. "They do wonderful work. But we try to catch horses at the mid-level tracks, before they're worn out."

Wood and Zuber have contacts at racetracks around the country: trainers, exercise riders, vets and groomers, who are on the lookout for good, sound horses.

"When we see a horse we like, we watch them," said Wood. "I get e-mails from our contacts when the horses are not running anymore, or aren't winning, and then we buy them."

At that point, the horses are still sound, and many are still very young. At Bits & Bytes Farm, the thoroughbreds receive the best of vet and chiropractic care, if needed, and then are retrained for hunting, jumping or other sporting events. The ultimate goal is to match each horse with a new, loving owner.

"Everyone thinks thoroughbreds are crazy or crippled when they're off the track," said Wood. "Our mission is to prove that's not true. Thoroughbreds are the golden retrievers of the horse world. They're very much people-oriented. They make wonderful pets and sport horses."

Bits & Bytes Farm has about 20 stalls, but Wood and Zuber help many more horses than they can house through their "prospect" program. Prospect horses are still with the owners or trainers at the tracks, but are available for sale through the farm. Wood and Zuber put buyers in touch with the trainer and vet, and the horses are thoroughly checked over before the sale.

"We couldn't take in all the horses, so we put them on the prospect page [of the farm's Web site]," said Wood. "We only sell prospects to people who can train them. We help many horses this way. We sold five last week; this week, we're working on seven. We have more than 100 success stories overall."

Zuber and Wood design Web sites as their "paying job," said Wood. But, really, it's all for the horses.

"I spend 80 to 90 percent of my time with the horses, but it's creating Web sites that makes the money," she said. "That's how we pay for this. But the horses — it's not a financial thing. What we make [from sales] goes right back into buying stuff for them."

The farm has only one paid helper to tend to the horses; the rest of the work and the training is done by Wood, Zuber and a network of friends and volunteers.

"These horses are such wonderful creatures — so loving, so forgiving and, once they're here, they're so grateful," said Wood. "I really feel that God put me here, in this position, to care for them."

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