Beyond the Finish Line: Sport Social Work's Role in Horse Racing

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Horse racing in North America is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, employing close to 500,000 workers who train, ride, and groom horses, as well as those who work to keep the racetrack running daily. In the past 10 years, the mental health needs of jockeys and those who work in the industry have been spotlighted, as issues regarding mental health, substance abuse, debilitating injuries and eating disorders have been noted. Sport social work, an emerging segment of the social work profession, has emerged to address the needs of athletes at all levels, including jockeys, backstretch workers and racetrack workers. This exploratory commentary and review is but one of the few that address the need for sport social work at North American racetracks and will illuminate the need for social work intervention in horse racing. The study will be viewed through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory in order to provide an overarching perspective as to how sport social workers may apply interventions in horse racing.

Keywords: Horse Racing, Mental Health, Stigma, Sport Social Work, Thoroughbred

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Introduction

In defining the term "Thoroughbred", the breed of horse involved in most horse racing in North America, one must refer to the breeding, training and racing of a variety of horses whose ancestry traces back to three male horses-sires-– the Darley Arabian, the Godolphin Arabian, and the Byerley Turk. While horse racing in Europe at the beginning of the 17th century became popular, the animals used in racing tended to be slower and heavier. Arabian horses were known for their grace, speed, and stamina, and as a result, the three sires were brought to England from the Mediterranean Middle East in the early 1700's and bred to the stronger native English horses (The Jockey Club, 2026; University of Oklahoma, 2026).

The result of breeding the English horses to the three Arabian horses resulted in animals which could maintain high rates of speed (up to over 40 miles per hour) and carry weight over extended distances, some as far as 2 ¼ miles. These horses were termed "Thoroughbreds" by the English aristocracy, which supported, promoted, and patronized Thoroughbred racing (The Jockey Club, 2026).

Horse racing and wagering, or betting, originated in the early civilizations of the Romans, Egyptians, and Greeks, who were cognizant of the athletic abilities of horses as well as the potential of racing in these ancient societies. The concept of wagering on the outcome of races began to develop, with spectators "placing bets among themselves as a means to raise the stakes and enhance the excitement of the competition" (Newbury Race Course, 2026, The Origins of Horse Racing and Betting section, para 1).

The first recorded horse race took place in England in 1174. While the sport gained a following throughout the country, royalty and aristocrats noticed the attention paid to horse racing, and as such, the ruling class organized formal betting structures. In the early 16th century, horse racing became a professionalized sport, with standardized guidelines and rules in addition to established racing facilities. As a result, due to the standardized formats and rules of horse racing, betting practices also became formalized and structured, featuring betting pools, bookmakers, and oddsmakers, who would inform the betting public of the chances for victory of the racing horses (The Jockey Club, 2026; Newbury Race Course, 2026, The Origins of Horse Racing and Betting section, para 3).

In North America, Thoroughbred racing was first noted to occur on Long Island in 1665. However, Thoroughbred racing was formally organized in Maryland by Governor Samuel Ogle in 1745. The first race "between pedigreed horses, in the English style" occurred in Annapolis the same year (University of Oklahoma, 2026, para. 15).

Since the beginning of the sport, Thoroughbred horse racing in North America has historically attracted large amounts of money, especially through on- and off-track betting, advertising, sponsorships, and sales of horses at auctions throughout the United States and Canada. Horse racing is "one of the biggest entertainment and sporting industries in the United States" (Bull, 2025, p. 1). In 2023 alone, the horse industry, which includes horse racing, contributed some $177 billion to the US economy(Bull, 2025).

Multi-million-dollar feature races, such as the Kentucky Derby, Belmont Stakes, Preakness Stakes, or the Breeders' Cup, are but a small fraction of the racing industry in the United States and Canada. Few see the preparation needed to enter a horse in a race, whether it

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be the lowest ranks of the sport, thousand-dollar claiming races at obscure rural racetracks, or in the $3 million Kentucky Derby.

For the purposes of this review, the focus will be on those employed in Thoroughbred racing in North America. Arabian and American Quarter Horses race at several tracks across North America; however, the majority of racing is conducted at Thoroughbred facilities. Also, two Directors of Backstretch Programs from mid-Atlantic racetracks were contacted by the author to understand the resource needs of backstretch workers and jockeys and to gauge interest in hosting a master's level student to work with and assist racetrack employees and jockeys in providing social work interventions and resource development and access. These directors were selected by the author due to the racetracks' proximity to the author's place of employment, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. It should be noted that, as this is an exploratory review, personal communication was included to provide an overview and illuminate a potential client population need. Personal communication, along with anecdotes recovered from such conversations, has several limitations. These discussions may be unrecoverable, hold bias, and may be unreliable and ungeneralizable (Lund University, 2026; American Psychological Association, 2020).

In order to gauge the need for potential sport social work involvement in racing, discussions were held with those who currently work with and provide resources to racetrack employees in two mid-Atlantic racetracks, where the author worked with the tracks to set up potential Master's level interns, who attend Millersville University of Pennsylvania's Master of Social Work program. Additionally, this review will examine the issues sport social work can address in working with backstretch workers, track personnel, and the jockeys who ride horses through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is used as a model in social work that directs practitioners to assess client needs across systems, which include the various features that form a client's perspective (Cox et al., 2022). Applying this theory for use by a sport-focused social work practitioner, the author interviewed racetrack personnel and reviewed literature to help understand racetrack workers, jockeys, and trainers' needs for potential social work intervention. By applying an ecological systems approach to the horse racing client population, a sport social worker becomes aware of not only micro individual needs, but also the meso settings within each racing location, in addition to the social network and macro systems that impact those who work in horse racing. Ecological systems theory and its applicability to the sport of horse racing in North America will be further explored in the Discussion section of this review.

Literature Review

Sport Social Work

One of the core missions of social work is the promotion of mental health literacy in the population at large (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). As will be discussed later, the horse racing industry has attached a great deal of stigma to those seeking mental health treatment. Social workers, and more specifically, sport social workers, educate athletes and their support staff on symptomatology, reducing stigma and improving access to treatment. (Moore et al., 2022).

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With the emergence of sport social work as a subset of social work practice in the last 10-15 years, social workers have been hired, or internships have been created for master's level social work students in numerous athletic settings at the professional levels of sport, along with inclusion in college and high school athletic programs. Sport social workers assist athletes of all levels with such topics as decision-making processes, mental health literacy, navigating life and relationships, and developing social support (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2026; Bates & Multer, 2025; Moore et al., 2022).

While the demand for sport social workers in North America has increased over the past 10 years due to an increasing awareness of the mental health needs of athletes, the need for training and educating potential workers has been addressed by several universities and agencies, such as the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the University of Kentucky, the University of Michigan, and Millersville University of Pennsylvania (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2006; Millersville University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, 2026, The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, 2026; The University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2026). Sport social workers assess athletes for mental health or substance abuse issues and provide education on social issues such as dating violence, sexual assault, or career planning (Felizzi, 2017; Gattis & Moore, 2022; Haggerty & Felizzi, 2022).

Additionally, advocacy and service linkage on behalf of clients is a foundation of social work practice across all settings (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Specifically, sport social work seeks to encourage well-being at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels through collaborations between the profession of social work and athletics of all levels (ASWIS, 2026).

As many racetrack workers are non-unionized, or non-represented, many rely on the charity and support of racetrack staff for basic needs- needs that can be addressed by the creation of food or clothing banks for the workers and jockeys, as well as linkage to medical and dental facilities local to the track. The families of racetrack workers and jockeys often need assistance in registering children for school and in accessing transportation for grocery shopping or medical appointments (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

While social workers advocate against oppressive policies in all areas of practice, sport social workers must contend with situations and assist clients in identifying repressive practices that marginalize and take advantage of their athletic population. In horse racing, backstretch employees are often cash-poor and can work up to 16 hours a day. Many are undocumented immigrants or hourly wage employees with no benefits (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). If a jockey is injured in a race, they must depend on charity, as a jockey will not get paid while they are injured. For jockeys coming from other countries (many come from Mexico, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, as well as Europe), they may not have support systems established when they first start riding in North America. Using a social justice lens, there appears to be a need for advocacy support and service linkage for those riding professionally and working on North American racetracks. (Bates & Multer, 2025; BEST, 2025; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2025; Voss, 2023).

Sport social work has an immediate opportunity to work with the jockey athletes and their support workers to assist and improve quality of life for those involved in horse racing. The next sections will discuss how sport social work can intervene to educate about the numerous issues that affect professional jockeys and those who are involved in thoroughbred racing in North America.

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Backstretch Workers

For each horse entering a race, there are numerous people preparing the animal to compete. Teams of grooms, hotwalkers, exercise riders, farriers, trainers, and their assistants work with the horses to prepare for competition. Most of this work is unseen by the public, and this preparation occurs at every racetrack. This area, where horses are stabled, bathed, trained, and groomed, is known as the backstretch (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

The backstretch, depending on the racetrack, often consists of stables, training offices, equine medical facilities, dormitories for the workers, as well as cafeterias for those who spend their days and nights at the track. As many racing seasons span several months of the year, backstretch employees "follow the horse" to the next track where the horse will race. When one track ends its season, workers, trainers, and jockeys often move their tack to another racetrack. On the East Coast of the United States, that often means moving from, for example, Delaware Park to Tampa Bay Downs, in Florida (Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

In North America, many tracks operate for several months in each season. During the times the tracks are not open for racing, most workers, jockeys, and trainers travel to other courses to conduct business. For example, on the east coast of the United States, tracks in New York will operate from January to May, move to Saratoga or Delaware Park or Park Racing, outside of Philadelphia, or to Monmouth Park in New Jersey. Some workers may move to Gulfstream Park in Florida in the winter. In most cases, all workers, jockeys, and trainers live an itinerant lifestyle, one which has them moving several times a year (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Given that most backstretch employees are transient and follow the racetrack's season, there are numerous issues workers, jockeys, and trainers must contend with to work. It is not unusual to have a groom move from Florida to New York to Kentucky in one year. (J. Hammond, personal communication, November 11, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

To that end, workers often need to be acclimated to services and resources when they land at a new track. In many cases, backstretch workers will be responsible for moving their families with them, which potentially presents issues in registering children for school, finding living quarters, securing child or health care, and accessing day-to-day services, such as grocery shopping and medical care, for the workers and their families. Often, workers may need to sign up for Medicaid services or, given the large influx of foreign workers in the industry in the last 20 years, depending on where the track is located, they may have to report to immigration authorities to renew their work visas. Additionally, in many tracks across North America, there are often a number of undocumented immigrants working on the backstretch (Bustillo, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Indeed, in spring 2025, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided several tracks in the United States, seeking to arrest undocumented workers (Hegerty, 2025). This push by the United States Government to arrest and detain undocumented workers has caused a number of issues among horse trainers, who hire the backstretch workers, to express concern about workers being arrested, deported, and ultimately forcing trainers to scramble to find employees to take care of and prepare the horses for racing (Bustillo, 2025; Hegerty, 2025; Nevills, 2025).

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It was found that services for racetrack workers are not uniform across North America. Existing programs, such as The Jockey Club, the Horseman's Benevolent and Protective Association (HBPA), the Horse Racing Safety and Integrity Authority (HISA), The Jockey Guild, and the Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund (PDJF), lobby legislators at the federal level to promote the racing industry and mandate safety issues for horses and jockeys. Their intent is not to provide mental health services for jockeys or backstretch employees, but rather to advocate for uniform codes and regulations regarding the sport (Horse Racing Safety and Integrity Authority, 2026; Horseman's Benevolent and Protective Association, 2026; Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund, 2026; The Jockey Guild, 2026).

In each state where racing is held, there is a Thoroughbred racing association, such as the Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (MTHA), Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (PTHA), New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (NYTHA), and the Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association (DTHA). These groups, much like the national organizations, promote and lobby for many similar initiatives at the state level. Many local organizations, through funding from the state legislatures, provide a Jockey Health and Welfare fund, which provides monies for medical treatment and disability (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2026).

Several racetracks and horse racing associations offer health care insurance and pension funds for backstretch employees throughout North America. However, to be eligible, one must be a salaried, full-time employee of a trainer who holds the required number of horse stalls at each racetrack (Delaware Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Maryland Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026, Pennsylvania Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026). However, those employees who are hourly, temporary, or undocumented workers are ineligible for health care insurance and pensions, and therefore are often in need of medical, financial, food, and clothing assistance (Casteneda et al., 2010; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Thoroughbred Charities of America, 2026; Tobin et al., 2026). Tobin et al.'s (2026) study of backstretch workers in the United Kingdom showed that among backstretch workers, mental health issues were predominant, with 65% of workers experiencing anxiety, 60% depression, and up to 80% of the respondents reporting stress linked to financial concerns and limited support from the racing profession.

Besides the state-based organizations, there are no uniform providers of resources and services to all North American racetracks. While one local racetrack may provide food banks or clothing closets for employees, others may not offer such services. In New York, the Backstretch Employees Service Team (BEST) and the Belmont Child Care programs provide food, clothing, medical referrals, transportation to services, counseling, and educational assistance to primarily backstretch employees at three racetracks in the state: Belmont Park, Aqueduct Racetrack, and Saratoga Racecourse. Finger Lakes Racetrack, in New York, does not receive services from the BEST program (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026).

As social workers, a foundational underpinning of the profession is to address oppression and advocate for marginalized clients (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Thoroughbred horse trainers hire and employ grooms, stable hands, and hotwalkers to prepare horse facilities and care for each animal. Backstretch workers, who work for hourly wages, often without medical or health benefits, are susceptible to exploitation by their employers. In 2025, Steve Asmussen, one of the most successful thoroughbred horse trainers in America, settled a case brought by the United States Department of Labor and paid over $350,000 to grooms and

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stable workers in his employ in back wages and overtime he withheld from workers. This was not the first time Asmussen was accused of unfair business practices. In 2012, he was sued by the federal Department of Labor for withholding pay and overtime to his backstretch workers, in a case that was settled. In 2019, the Department of Labor again sued the trainer for non-payment of back wages involving workers in his New York operation. The suit was settled as Asmussen paid $563,800 in back wages to the 170 affected employees. In another case, Asmussen settled with the Department of Labor to reimburse backstretch workers $129,776 to resolve violations of the federal H-2B worker program that occurred from 2016 to 2019. The H-2B program is utilized to allow businesses to hire workers with temporary visas (Downey, 2025; Finley, 2021).

Sport social workers are aware that the needs of itinerant athletes and workers are varied, and for those who work in the horse racing industry, the needs of the population may far surpass what is offered at different tracks. In speaking with program directors at two tracks on the East Coast of the United States, the needs for sport social work in the horse racing industry became apparent. As noted, backstretch employees groom horses, clean the stables, transport horses, and assist trainers in preparing horses to race. Additionally, track workers- those who prepare the racing surfaces, work on the starting gate, maintain the facility, as well as timers, stewards, and other track personnel often travel from track to track during the year and are frequently in need of services and resources for themselves or their families (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Trainers who are responsible for conditioning and entering horses in races often have issues with referring workers to resources, simply because they focus on training, and not service referral or resource development for workers. Trainers have been affected by the current United States administration's crackdown on illegal immigration, as a number have lost trusted workers to deportation and/ or arrest (Wolken, 2025). To that end, Trainers are often unfamiliar with government regulations concerning employment or immigration and often don't know how or where to refer workers to obtain Medicaid coverage, working papers, or immigration information (Leonhardt, 2025; Nevills, 2025).

Backstretch employees are often unseen by the public, and while jockeys, horses, and trainers may receive the lion's share of attention and notoriety in the racing profession, these workers are what make winning horses and jockeys perform at the highest level (J. Hammond, personal communication, November 11, 2025; L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025; Tobin, 2026). However, the needs of this segment of the population are often overlooked or, in the case of Steve Asmussen, underpaid or cheated out of their hard-earned money.

In the above instance, utilizing an ecological theoretical approach, a sport social work practitioner would help the client navigate the systems that can oppress them, such as dishonest employers, and can educate clients regarding financial and mental health literacy as well as self-advocacy skills, and, as Casteneda et al. stated in their 2010 study, help diminish the idea that " [the] horses get treated better than we [backstretch workers] do" (p. 498).

Jockeys

Jockeys in North America, besides the horses, are often the most visible and courageous participants in the sport of Horse Racing (Gooding, 2025). To become a professional jockey requires years of physical training and mental preparation. It is not uncommon to have a jockey start their training in their early teens. Many jockeys leave their homes in adolescence to live in training centers with trainers, friends, extended family, or relatives. Many jockeys in North

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America come from several countries besides the US and Canada. In recent years, there have been many riders arriving from South America, Central America, Jamaica, England, Ireland, and France (Mmmimal, 2026; VonHippel, 2018).

Jockeys are under pressure to maintain weight, often under 125 pounds, to race. If a jockey is too heavy, they cannot race, as many races have weight limits for the riders. Much as in other sole performance sports such as gymnastics, wrestling, ice skating, track and field, the specter of eating disorders is a constant concern in the racing industry. (King et al., 2021; Losty, 2018; McGuane et al., 2019; McCarthy, P., 2025).

There are several other concerns working with professional jockeys as well. Jockeys may often need the services track workers seek for themselves and their families. Medical referrals, mental health counseling, housing issues, and financial issues are a few of the issues jockeys face while working at various tracks. According to Lynda Furlong, Director of the Backstretch Programs at Delaware Park, jockeys seek mental health counseling only when ordered to do so by track stewards, who oversee handing down discipline when jockeys are accused of acting unsafely or carelessly on the track. Most jockeys are, according to Furlong, referred to anger management education generally after a fight or disagreement, while on the track or in the jockeys' room (L. Furlong personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Jockey Injuries

Much like athletes in other sports, concussion issues are a focus of discussion in the jockey community. Thoroughbred racehorses can reach speeds of up to 45 miles an hour during a workout or in a race (Kelly, 2026). Riding a 1200-pound animal at such speed can present numerous risks. The speed rate, coupled with jostling between horses during a race, can increase the likelihood of physical injury. Between 1993 and 1996, a total of 6,545 injuries occurred during official races, for an average of 600 injuries per 1,000 jockeys per year (Anderson, 2025).

With regard to jockey injuries, a review of the literature found that most researchers focused on post-injury rehabilitation, concussion management, and return to competition. There is a need for coaches, counselors, horse trainers, and social workers to develop awareness of the athletes' emotional and financial needs during recovery (McCarthy, P., 2025; McCarthy, T., 2025; Voss, 2023).

The most common injuries are soft tissue damage, breaks, dislocations, and concussions (O'Connor et al., 2017). The dangers of riding thoroughbreds at high speed add up to an average of close to two jockeys dying from racing each year, and 60 riders suffering some form of paralysis worldwide (Anderson, 2025). Most jockey injuries range from mild (sprains, muscle pulls) to serious, career- and life-threatening injuries such as concussions, brain and spine damage. Falls from horses are a primary cause of these injuries, either during the race or in the starting gate prior to the race (Rosenblatt, 2025).

When a jockey is injured in North America, they often face recovery by themselves and depend on whatever insurance plan they can secure to cover medical costs. There are no team trainers, physical therapists, or medical doctors to assist and evaluate them post-injury. The cost of daily living can become an issue, especially if a jockey has little savings. Ramon Dominguez, a top rider in North America, suffered a career-ending head injury in 2013, when he fell from his mount at Aqueduct Racetrack. Dominguez faced a long recovery; however, he was fortunate to be covered by medical insurance to recover from his head injury and pursue other career opportunities in horse racing (Wilkin, 2013). Many jockeys who are injured often have little

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opportunities outside of racing and often cover their own costs for injury recovery. In Europe, while jockeys are recovering from injury, their day-to-day expenses are covered by entities such as the Professional Jockeys Fund, the Injured Jockey's Fund, and the Jockey's Education and Training Scheme (Brooks, 2025).

Jockeys in the United States and Canada earn no money until they secure a mount to race or ride during training (Voss, 2023). When injured, they earn nothing, unless backstretch employees and fellow jockeys create a GoFundMe or similar charitable program for incapacitated jockeys; but such help cannot be relied upon for the injured and their families. If a jockey in North America is seriously disabled, the Permanently Disabled Jockey's Fund can assist the rider; however, contributions to the PDJF have dwindled in the last few years, causing a restriction on what can be offered (Voss, 2023).

Many jockeys hide injuries and avoid medical care. If a jockey is labeled as "unfit to ride" by the track's doctors, they could lose a substantial amount of money and an opportunity to earn a livelihood. Recovery from injuries sustained on the track is rarely easy (Brooks, 2025). If a jockey is off a horse for a period, a trainer may find a replacement for the injured jockey. If that rider does well as a replacement, the trainer may never offer the original jockey a mount on the horse, or if they are suspicious of the jockey "getting hurt", they may never employ their services again (Voss, 2023). Jockeys will often try to hide physical injuries from owners, trainers, and peers. Since riding is their livelihood and a means of support for their families, there is inherent pressure from the industry to get back in the saddle, like many athletes, even if they are not 100% healthy (Gooding, 2025).

Jockeys and Weight Management

The issue of making weight is prevalent in jockeys' lives (McGuane et al., 2019). Horses are assigned to carry a jockey's weight in each race. In other words, if a horse is slated to carry 119 pounds, that jockey must weigh no more than 117 pounds to be eligible to ride. The extra two pounds account for the jockey's tack, or saddle and helmet, along with their boots, pants, and silks. (Jockey Club of the United Kingdom, n.d.). Due to the required weights of jockeys in horse racing, cutting weight and eating disorders are a constant concern of the riders themselves. Weight-making can negatively impact a jockey's mood as well as their attitudes towards eating, with the attendant issues that can come from missing regular, nutritious meals. If it is determined that a horse must carry a severely low weight, it was found that lower competitive riding weights were associated with more disordered eating attitudes, such as wasting or forced vomiting (King, Cullen, McGoldrick et al., 2021).

Jockeys are no different from other athletes competing in weight-sensitive sports. Many such athletes often implement excessive dieting practices, which, along with losing weight, also increases their likelihood of reducing bone density, developing an eating disorder, renal complications, and the associated stress that accompanies such physical issues (McGuane et al., 2019; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). McGuane et al. also found that in their study of 116 professional jockeys, 75% of the respondents stated they routinely skipped meals, and 81% admitted to restricting food intake during the racing season (2019).

The body of research on jockey weight management addresses "wasting" or forced vomiting to make weight. Many riders consider the practice "part of the game". In several jockey rooms in North America, a special "wasting bowl" for vomiting is included (Jockey Club of the United Kingdom, nd; McGuane et al., 2019; McCarthy, P., 2025). In McGuane et al.'s study

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from 2019, one jockey commented, “Starving is part of the sport and what we all do…We need the rides, so we make the weight” (p. 133).

Jockeys, Help Seeking Stigma, and Mental Health Issues

A search of the literature resulted in finding several articles that address the mental health of jockeys; however, the majority of the results reported on jockey physical and mental health in Europe, Australia, and Asia, not North America (Gooding, 2025; King, Cullen et al., 2023; King et al., 2021; Losty, 2018; McGuane et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the articles report on issues that transcend geographical areas, such as depression, anxiety, stress reactions, and mental health literacy.

While the stigma of seeking help remains an issue with many segments of the population, jockeys and the horse racing profession are not exempt (Whyno, 2023, p.1). Mike Smith, who won the Triple Crown, North America’s most prestigious horse racing series, in 2018 with the horse Justify, stated, “Asking for help in our sport is almost a sign of weakness, sad to say. You certainly don't want to show any signs of that. We're supposed to be tough and be able to handle it all.” Smith also said, "I know several riders that I knew very well committed suicide when it was all said and done. This is not all of a sudden just happening. It's been going on. You just never heard of it." (Whyno, 2023, p. 1).

As noted, most jockeys in North America are self-employed contractors and have a need to maintain positive relationships with trainers and owners responsible for providing horses to race. Jockeys, like many athletes, often disguise fears, concerns, injuries, and illness due to the persistent performance demands assigned to them (Gooding, 2025; King, Cullen et al., 2023).

In King, Cullen et al.’s 2023 study of professional jockeys and the barriers to seeking mental health treatment, one respondent replied: “They (trainers) might think ‘my jockeys not right in the head’… I’m sure in the back of their minds they’ll be thinking they’re just not right in the head… I don’t think it would be great for them to know too much. It might be an excuse for them to maybe get rid [of me] or try someone new.” (p. 196) Jockeys, to secure mounts, in order to make a living, have a need to maintain good relationships with trainers and owners responsible for providing horses to race (Ralph, 2023).

This help-seeking stigma can be, for jockeys, like other athletes, a protective factor against relational and non-relational maltreatment (Gattis & Moore, 2022). Trainers and owners may berate a jockey, in some cases, publicly after a perceived poor riding performance. While the trainer-jockey relationship is similar to a coach-athlete relationship, many considerations regarding negative treatment of athletes, such as emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and maltreatment, can be applied to how jockeys and trainers relate to each other (Choi, 2019; Hagerty & Felizzi, 2022; Kerr et al., 2020). Whyno (2023) wrote that North American jockey Trevor McCarthy has confronted trainers and owners to stop speaking angrily to fellow jockeys after races. Horse racing in North America is often considered an “old-school sport” (Whyno, 2023, p.3) where a hyper-masculinized set of beliefs has been ingrained in the sport for centuries, and the topic of seeking mental health treatment is still considered a forbidden topic (Whyno, 2023).

Besides the issues that physical injuries cause jockeys, mental issues and related disorders are prevalent in the industry. King, Cullen, and McGoldrick et al. in 2021 found that jockeys reported higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms when compared to other professional athletes. Substance abuse, notably alcohol abuse, appeared higher among jockeys

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than other elite athletes. The researchers found several risk factors for mental health issues among professional riders as well. These risk factors included fear of injury, fear of fear, low levels of social support, injuries themselves, constant and perceived stress issues, dissatisfaction and burnout, as well as contemplation of retirement (Gooding, 2025; Whyno, 2023).

Losty et al., in 2019, conducted an anonymous online study asking over 100 jockeys about their experiences with mental health concerns. Respondents were asked to self-assess regarding psychological distress, depression, anxiety, social phobia, self-esteem, and perceived stress. The researchers found that 54% of the respondents experienced at least one symptom of general psychological distress, depression, social anxiety, or general anxiety disorder. Several jockeys who participated in the study scored a high mean scores in psychological distress, anxiety, and perceived stress (Losty, 2019).

In North America, if a jockey wishes to seek mental health counseling, they must secure treatment mostly on their own, as there are few mental health providers on the payrolls of racetracks. Services must be paid out of pocket or by each individual jockey's health care plan. The local Horsemen's Benevolent Protective Associations may have a list of mental health providers, but due to the stigma of receiving mental health treatment, many choose not to avail of these services (New York Thoroughbred Horseman's Association, 2026; Whyno, 2023)

Eurico da Silva, a retired 30-year veteran jockey and a mental health coach for riders, stated, "In 30 years of riding horses, I can say to you that I never heard anybody talk about the emotional pain, never talked about going for help…I approached many jockeys that I feel like they need help, and many times I said, 'Go for help.' I motivate them to go for help. They just listen, but they don't really want to talk about [mental health]." (p.2) The retired jockey's statement underlines the need for social work intervention in horse racing.

Implications for Sport Social Work

After a review of the extant literature, there appears to be a clear indication for sport social work involvement. As mentioned previously, the need for mental health intervention has been established with jockeys to address a host of issues: eating disorders, anxiety, mental recovery from injuries, end-of-riding-career worries, substance abuse, depression, financial problems, adjusting to new cultures, suicidal ideation, as well as the stigma of seeking help are just a few of the concerns jockeys face.

On the backstretch, many employees who support the industry, grooms, hotwalkers, trainers, hired hands, and track personnel may need services and resources within the community, especially for the itinerant workers who travel from track to track across the country. With frequent moves and upheaval, there is a need for resource access for workers to assist in relocation, registering children in schools, access to medical care, support for those in need of food or clothing assistance, or mental health intervention. Notwithstanding these potential needs, backstretch workers may need to develop advocacy skills for themselves, their families, and co-workers to avoid unfair labor practices such as having overtime wages withheld and poor and unsafe working conditions at the racetrack.

Jockeys have stated the need for assistance with emotional and mental health issues (McCarthy, P, 28 November 2025; Whyno, 2023). Sport social workers possess the skills to work with athletes of all levels, and assisting jockeys with the emotional challenges of a high-level and dangerous sport can fill the gap in mental health services for these athletes. However,

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many in the horse racing industry, especially jockeys themselves, as is the case in other sports, are reluctant to access mental health services due to help-seeking stigma (Gooding, 2025; King et al., 2021; King, 2021; Losty, 2018). This is a challenge for sport social workers, but it is a hurdle all social workers face in dealing with stigma of seeking mental health support. Sport social workers are capable of negotiating and overcoming barriers of mental health treatment stigma and are skilled at working through these issues with athletes and those associated with athletics. While the stigma of mental health treatment, especially with jockeys, may be prevalent (King et al., 2023), those who work in supporting roles and on the backstretch may also hold a negative view of receiving help for their mental health. The backstretch in North America is often populated by immigrants, both documented and undocumented, who may be reluctant to engage with resources for fear of deportation or due to cultural factors regarding seeking mental health treatment (Bustillo, 2025). Again, this is another opportunity for sport social workers to educate and partner with backstretch communities, as well as each track's jockey colony, to overcome the stigma of receiving mental health treatment or social work services and resource linkage. Improving an athlete's mental health awareness and literacy is in line with the social work foundation of educating and helping to improve one's level of emotional well-being (Moore et al., 2022). Sport social workers, because of their training, are well versed in psychoeducation, information dissemination, and in addressing barriers to treatment and service delivery.

Additionally, with the large population of non-English-speaking workers at the racetrack, bilingual or multilingual sport social workers would be a valuable resource in the backstretch and in the jockey's room (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Coupled with the social work value of confidentiality, sport social workers who are multilingual could become trusted supports for those who are working in a new or unfamiliar country.

The opportunities to educate and offer experiences for sport social work students, or those interested in working in the profession, are available and needed at racetracks (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The ability to design, present, and evaluate programs dealing with a host of issues for jockeys and backstretch employees is but one need. According to Lynda Furlong, director of Backstretch Programs at Delaware Park racetrack in Stanton, DE, a sport social work intern would be "Put to work immediately…we need mental health education, substance abuse, eating disorder, domestic violence prevention and anger management programs and educations" (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

Delaware Park offers career counseling services on a PRN basis, as well as a Food Bank and Clothing Closet for all employees, which Furlong said a sport social work intern would be responsible for managing and expanding. Despite the fact that Delaware Park's racing schedule runs from April to November, the need for services is year-round, as the track serves as a training facility and is staffed by workers and jockeys, who exercise horses throughout the year (L. Furlong, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

The implications are obvious and clear for sport social work involvement in horse racing. Service provision, resource development, psychoeducation, mental health literacy, eating disorder awareness, anger management, and post-career education, to mention but a few needs, are all indicated for jockeys, backstretch workers, and track personnel. These needs speak to the strengths of social work, and specifically sport social workers, who are adept at working with high-level athletes and their support networks. A proposed systemic approach to these issues will be presented next.

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Discussion

Based upon the findings and research involved in this review, it is clear sport social work has a place in horse racing in North America. The needs of those in the sport speak to the foundational values of the Social Work profession of Service, Competence, Dignity and Worth of the Person, Interpersonal Relationships, Integrity and Competence in several ways (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). Service linkage to racetrack community services, psychoeducation regarding mental health, food and clothing bank needs, as well as the demands for clinical social work are evident. Additionally, social work education programs can partner with racetracks to provide internship opportunities for students who wish to work in program development, service provision, and clinical work can find many opportunities to practice sport social work and work with those who ride and those who train and groom Thoroughbred racehorses.

To intervene with those who work at racetracks across North America, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model appears to be an appropriate theoretical foundation for sport social work intervention. At racetracks in North America, there are various systems that interact and intersect with each other. Ecological systems theory is widely applied in social work to comprehend how numerous systems shape individuals' lives and to identify potential areas for intervention (Crawford, 2020). As social workers, this person-in-environment perspective allows the practitioner to witness the impacts, as well as the interrelatedness and importance each of the client's systems has on one another.

The ecological systems model includes the concepts of process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Process relates to "the basic intrapsychic and interpersonal processes of human development that requires their investigation in the actual environments, both immediate and remote, in which human beings live" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 12). In the horse racing population, a sport-focused social worker could utilize the process of psychoeducation to assist in one's emotional, financial, career, and mental health literacy development. At the racetrack, this may include education regarding eating disorders, substance use, coping with career-ending injuries and the resultant anxiety or depression that may occur, or learning how to navigate immigration issues. To that end, the social worker is enriching the developmental processes of the individual through education and support.

Person, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), represents how people relate to their environment, such as how grooms, hotwalkers, and backstretch workers interact with supervisors, or how they can navigate systems of oppression, such as unscrupulous trainers who may withhold pay or fire them without just cause (Downey, 2025). Person may also refer to how the itinerant track personnel acclimates themselves to a new track's community, and how successfully they secure resources for themselves or their families.

Bronfenbrenner's idea of context refers to microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems of a culture or society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Microsystems in the horse racing community are those in which the individual directly participates with others at the racetrack. This would include how individuals within the track's culture interact with each other- for example, grooms with trainers, jockeys with owners, owners with track administrative personnel. A sport social worker could use their skills of engagement to work with these individual systems to foster collaboration and understanding and assist in developing a safe workspace for the various workers in the backstretch.

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A social worker may have to provide specific interventions for jockeys. These interventions would include working through injuries and the anxiety of losing mounts, and the mental strain of the physical rehabilitation that may be needed to get back in the saddle. Additionally, as noted earlier, jockeys may require psychoeducation and assessment regarding anger management. When fights occur in the Jockey's Room, or anywhere else on the track, jockeys are often required to attend anger management training, most often provided by an outside consultant, or the rider would have to find a therapist on their own, to provide services (L. Furlong, personal communication November 19, 2025). By using an ecological systems approach, an on-site social worker could fill that role to assist the jockeys in relating to the microsystem of the jockey's room in a pro-social and appropriate manner.

In horse racing in North America, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of mesosystems refers to when individuals from different microsystems interact with one another and operate independently. At the racetrack, there are distinct microsystems- backstretch workers, jockeys, trainers, owners, and track personnel such as track maintenance workers, starting gate crews, and support staff. As in any culture, these sub-groups often act independently of each other, with their own ideas of how to conduct their work. Conflicts may arise when trainers criticize or berate jockeys for the manner in which they rode a horse in a race, or when a groom becomes angry if a starting gate worker handles a horse harshly before a race. It may also refer to how the microsystem transitions between the various groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Crawford, 2020). Can these groups relate to each other appropriately, or is there constant conflict between them? Applying this concept to sport social work practice, a social worker could mediate issues between the groups by consulting with and bringing together those with disparate perspectives, and arbitrating disagreements between a jockey and a trainer, or a groom and track personnel.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) discussed how exosystems, regarding external social environments or societal structures that do not openly involve the individual, may influence the person indirectly by affecting their immediate work, home, or community settings. For a sport-focused social worker, this could involve intervening with state or local horse racing regulatory commissions on behalf of a client who may have a licensing issue, or assisting clients and their families with a child's school registration. It could also refer to helping clients find clothes, food, financial and medical resources as well as housing, as they move from different tracks.

Macrosystems, according to Bronfenbrenner, are the policies, politics, mores, and customs that symbolize the community or larger society of the individual and their family (Crawford, 2020). In a horse racing context, Federal racing authorities, such as HISA, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Labor can impact a racetrack worker's life by instituting raids on racetracks, as ICE did in 2025 (Bustillo, 2025). The Department of Labor, consequently, can assist workers in obtaining back wages or other denied benefits by ordering employers to pay disputed or withheld pay (Finley, 2021). HISA can affect the racing community by instituting guidelines for jockey and trainer registration with the agency, or by introducing safety and horse medication standards for track workers (HISA, 2026).

Sport-focused social workers may intervene at the macro level by advocating for individuals when clients are faced with labor disputes, assisting clients in compliance with HISA by assisting with registration, or assisting the racetrack by helping to implement safety procedures with the population. Advocating for a fair and just immigration policy is but one of the roles a sport-focused social worker could play in assisting those undocumented workers with whom they may work. Social justice issues are a foundational aspect of social work (National Association of Social Workers, 2026), and as such, given the raids ICE staged at racetracks

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across the United States in 2025, a sport-focused social worker could be a trusted support for those undocumented and unrepresented.

Bronfenbrenner's precept of chronosystems within ecological systems theory refers to the time experienced by the individual and their community (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The interaction an individual experiences over time are thought by Bronfenbrenner to impact their genetic proclivities to react to situations, such as living in a time where immigrant and undocumented racetrack workers may be detained by the government (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bustillo, 2025), or a time where society views mental health literacy as acceptable and where jockeys seek such help without fear of losing mounts (Boon, 2011; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; McCarthy, P. 2025; McCarthy, T. 2025). Sport social work advocacy plays a role in assisting clients in working through societal stigma to develop mental health literacy and freedom.

Advocating for oppressed and marginalized populations is a foundational underpinning of the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2026). As noted, many backstretch workers, as well as jockeys, are not represented by labor unions and have little collective bargaining power with their employers. A sport social worker could assist in empowering workers and jockeys by giving voice to their demands, helping to develop self-advocacy skills, and collaborating with colleagues to open conversations with trainers, horse owners, and racetrack administrators to develop resources at the track for mental health literacy, community resource development and access, such as medical and dental care, legal assistance, as well as instituting fair labor practices to ensure employees are paid overtime and on time.

A sport social worker could advocate for clients to state regulatory commissions on the need to develop policies at the macro level to assist those in the industry to receive support, benefits, and resources to ensure a safe, protected, and productive working environment. As noted, many racetrack workers and jockeys are non-represented and may need policies ensuring such protection. Nationally, sport social work could inform entities such as the HISA, HBPA, and the Jockey Guild of the need for sport social work intervention in horse racing at their national conferences, and by discussing the potential need to create programs to address racetrack workers and jockeys.

Given the needs of racetrack workers in North America for a sport-focused social work presence, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may effectively address the population needs when interventions are proposed. The understanding a sport social worker possesses regarding the intersection of the various systems all workers live within can help to foster individual, group, and community development by creating interventions at these levels to help empower, improve, and strengthen racetrack employees' lives.

The Millersville University School of Social Work developed a relationship with Delaware Park Racetrack, a major East Coast racing facility, to provide a dual-degree Master of Social Work/ Masters of Education in Sport Management student intern. Delaware Park was selected due to the proximity of the racetrack to the Millersville campus, and the interest the Director of Backstretch Programs, Lynda Furlong, showed when the author communicated the idea of placing an intern at the track (L. Furlong, Personal Communication, 11/19/2025; 5/28/2026). The intern will be responsible for maintaining and expanding the racetrack's Food Bank and Clothes Closet. The student will also provide education presentations to jockeys on such topics as anger management, the mental health needs of the jockey athletes, substance abuse, eating disorder awareness, and financial literacy, in addition to providing resources to all backstretch workers, riders, trainers, and their families at Delaware Park. The intern will be supervised by a Millersville University faculty member, and due to the fact the track is open

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year-round, the student will be able to fulfill a sustainable internship throughout the academic year (L. Furlong, personal communication, February 6, 2026). To that end, student intern input would be valuable for those seeking to understand the impact made by placing an intern at the racetrack. This will provide information for planning for future internships, as well as determine any impact the placement, as well as their interventions, had on the client population.

Conclusions

As sport social work has made inroads and strides in North America in the last 10 years, the profession continues to find areas and niches to establish practice. While both ASWIS and the US Olympic and Paralympic organizations have stated a need for social work and mental health interventions with athletes (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2026; United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, 2026), there continues to be additional athletic arenas where social work may be indicated. Additionally, as those social workers who have worked in athletic programs will note, there may be pushback from those who may perceive social workers as "outsiders". This is not a new development for social workers in all areas of practice. Making inroads will require the social work skills of engagement and trust-building to create a solid working and therapeutic alliance with workers, trainers, and jockeys regarding the development of mental health literacy (Baker, 2025; Bates & Multer, 2025; Moore et al., 2025).

In utilizing an ecological systems approach, it will be critical to educate workers, trainers, and jockeys on how the various systems in the horse racing community can offer one another and empower each other. Additionally, due to the stigma of help-seeking, one must recognize that trust and consistency with those in the horse racing profession must be established, fostered, and maintained, as the provision of mental health services at North American racetracks is still in its infancy as of this writing. Creating relationships, engaging with the various systems, developing trust within the local horse racing communities, and creating collaborations with national racing organizations will assist social workers in establishing effective client services at the racetrack.

The implications for sport social work in horse racing are clear. Social Workers are adept at linking clients to resources and brokering services for those in need, and as noted, those in all phases of horse racing can benefit from service linkage to their communities. Additionally, as social work provides the majority of mental health services in North America (National Association of Social Workers, 2026), the path is clear for Sport Social Work to answer the call to the post and enter the starting gate.

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